MODI SARKAR'S GAMING PUSH

GUJARAT'S HUMAN SMUGGLING RACKET

THE NOT SO BIG FAT INDIAN WEDDING

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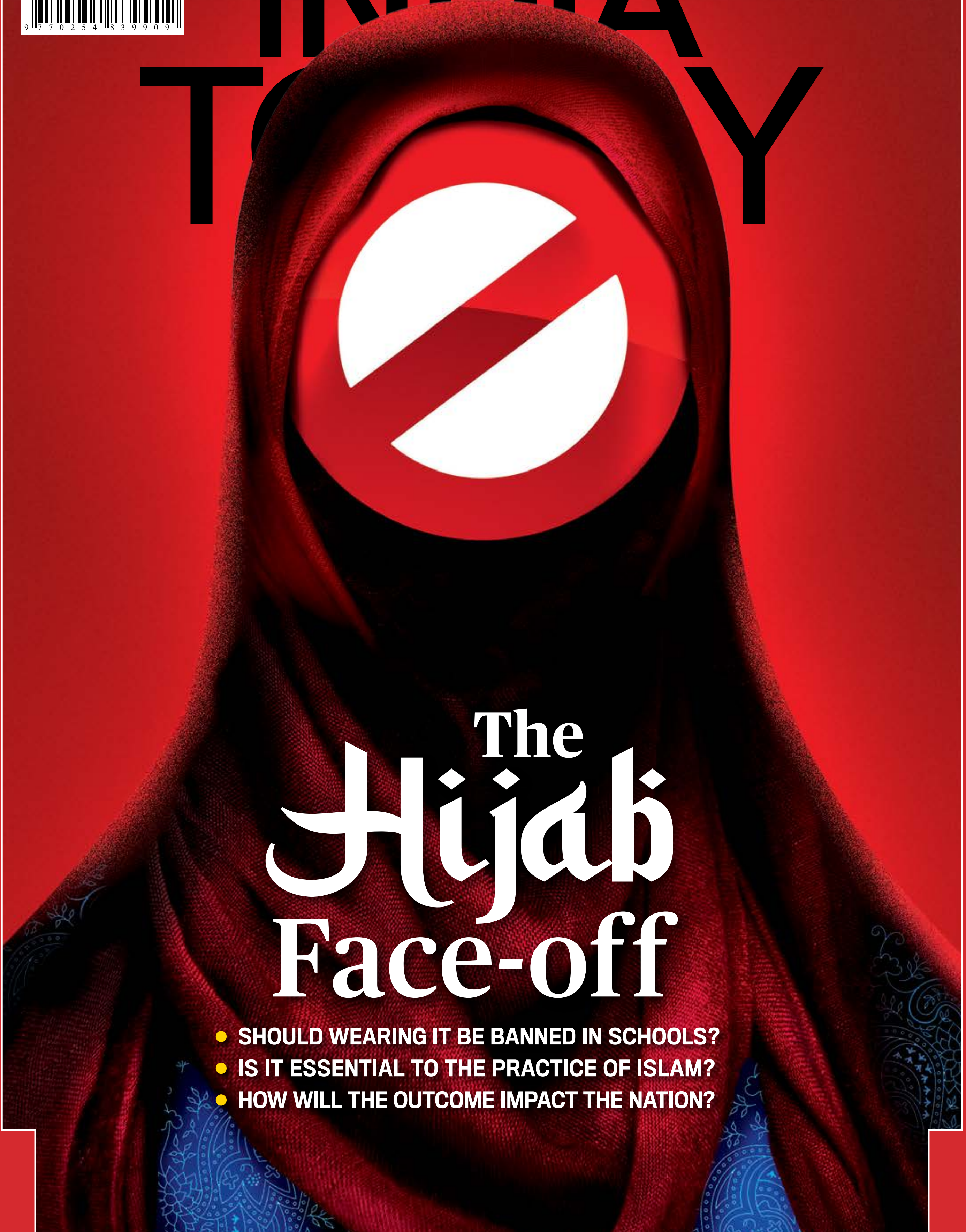

The Hijab Face-off

- SHOULD WEARING IT BE BANNED IN SCHOOLS?
- IS IT ESSENTIAL TO THE PRACTICE OF ISLAM?
- HOW WILL THE OUTCOME IMPACT THE NATION?

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FROM THE

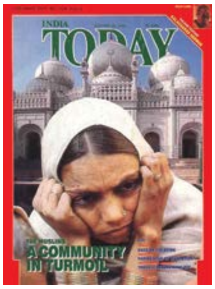
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

In India, controversies sometimes emerge out of the unlikeliest places and when you least expect them. Last month, it erupted in coastal Karnataka when a group of schoolgirls in a government-run pre-university school said they were being prevented from entering their classrooms because they were wearing hijabs (headscarves). The issue snowballed into a larger conflagration. Several such incidents were reported across the state, the state government ordered an unprecedented three-day closure of all schools, and the schoolgirls petitioned the high court. Whether or not hijabs can be worn to school is now a question that the courts will have to answer.

Although the controversy arose in the intensely polarised landscape of coastal Karnataka, it soon spread to other educational institutions in the state. The issue now boils down to an individual's right to practise their religion versus the right of a government educational institution to impose a dress code.

INDIA TODAY
ANGST & ASPIRATION

March 17, 2014



January 31, 1986

More significantly, it has raised some fundamental issues of human rights as defined in the Constitution. Two of these rights, guaranteed under the Constitution, of religious and personal freedom, are relevant to this debate. The Right to Equality under Article 14 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. The Right to Freedom of Religion under Article 25 says all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practise and propagate religion freely.

The hijab controversy goes even deeper into the question of whether we are a country that accepts a diversity of cultures—an attribute celebrated across the world. As if this were not enough, other sensitive subjects—gender rights, identity, community relations and electoral politics based on majority-minority conflicts—have joined the fray. With assembly elections underway in five Indian states, this has predictably ballooned into a political controversy, just as other issues have in recent years—from cow slaughter to protests over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Another way to view the hijab issue is to see it as hardening of the Hindu stance on food and clothing. There has simultaneously been a Muslim consolidation and pushback, with members of the minority community re-emphasising their identity through clothes. Unfortunately, this leads to more conflict than resolution because political parties are quick to harness emotional issues into vote-catching strategies and polarise the debate.

Sporting religious accoutrements like veils and headscarves in public has been globally contentious. In 2018, conservative Saudi Arabia lifted a decades-old ban that made it mandatory for women to completely cover themselves in public. Women could now choose what they wore as long as they were modestly dressed. In 2011, France passed legislation to ban the covering of faces.

In India, the debate on whether a hijab can be worn has so far been confined to government-funded educational institutions like schools where children are required to wear uniforms up to the 12th standard. The fact that many of the educational institutions in Karnataka have been inconsistent in their stand on the issue—allowing the hijab earlier and then suddenly banning it—has only aggravated the situation. Even students who were happily going without hijabs are now donning it. The issue has now acquired communal overtones. It could easily lead to calls for bans in other spaces.

One key question being asked now is whether the hijab is essential to the practice of Islam given the ambiguities over its usage. The Quran mentions the word 'khimar,' meaning a piece of cloth covering the head. Some women choose to cover their faces and hands too, but this is not scripturally mandated.

We asked three scholars to weigh in on the debate. Islamic scholar Zafarul-Islam Khan says the hijab broadly denotes the modest dress code Muslim women should observe in the presence of men outside their immediate family. Mejindarpal Kaur, International Legal Director of the NGO United Sikhs, believes a hijab-wearing woman must be respected for exercising her choice to wear it. As she says, freedom of religion or belief is a private right in a public place. You cannot expect a person to hold a belief or to practise their faith privately. That too on a part-time basis, as it would be antithetical to the universality of the religion or belief, she says. Scholar and author Purushottam Agrawal believes the job of a progressive society—of scholars of religion, culture, and gender—is to penetrate the veil. Not to smile indulgently at regression, but to persuade young people against it. Harassment of young girls, of course, is no way to convince them. Possibly wearing the hijab in the prescribed manner in consonance with the school uniform could be an amicable solution.

Our cover story, 'The Hijab Face-off', written by Managing Editor Sunil Menon with an on-the-spot report by Nabila Jamal, Senior Anchor, India Today TV, examines the present controversy and addresses the big questions in the debate.

What I find distressing is the radicalisation of school-going children on both sides. Girls are wearing hijabs or niqabs and boys are waving saffron scarves and confronting each other on the street. This doesn't bode well for the future of India.

The hijab debate is important because it forces us to ask questions about what we essentially are—a multicultural, multi-religious society. We should look for ways to unite rather than divide our people.

(Aroon Purie)

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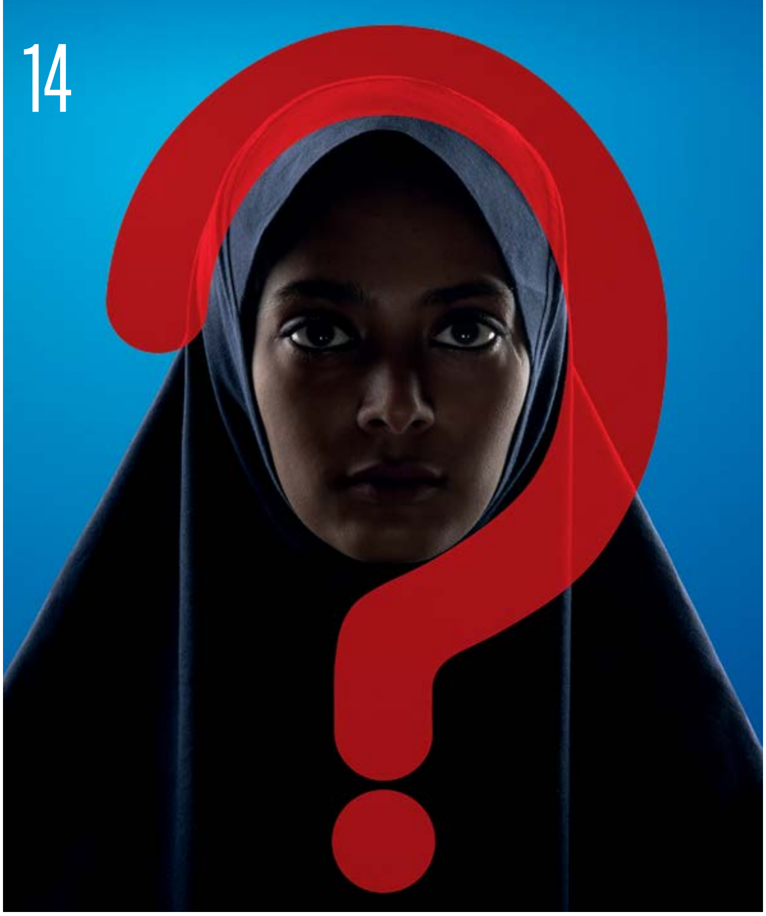

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COVER STORY

THE HIJAB FACE-OFF

Should schools ban hijab on its premises? Is it essential to the practice of Islam? What implications will the court verdict have for the nation?

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UPFRONT

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Ban 'NEET' SaveTN Students
'நீட்'
தேர்வை ரத்து செய்!

LOUD AND CLEAR
M.K. Stalin wears a mask with anti-NEET messaging

ANI

TAMIL NADU

A NEET STRATEGY

By Amarnath K. Menon

Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin is finding it daunting to keep at least one pre-poll promise: getting exemption for his state from the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) for admissions to medical and dental colleges. On February 1, Governor R.N. Ravi returned the Tamil Nadu Admission to Undergraduate Medical Courses Bill, 2021, that proposes this change. Swiftly, the DMK government, at a special session of the legislative assembly on February 8, adopted the bill afresh to put the ball back in the governor's court.

As per the Constitution, the governor now needs to reserve the bill for consideration of the President of India, who is the assenting authority. There is no prescribed time limit, though, for the President to take a decision. "The reason why drafters of our Constitution did not specify timelines for constitutional authorities was that they believed these authorities would take quick decisions and not allow important issues to fester," says N.R. Elango, senior advocate and DMK MP. "The 10th schedule of the Constitution does not prescribe time limits for the assembly speaker to decide on the question of disqualification [of legislators]. But the Supreme Court, in its wisdom, has prescribed three months."

NEET is conducted in 11 languages, including Tamil. But Tamil Nadu argues that it is difficult to assess students' knowledge in all subjects, especially physics, chemistry and biology, through a common entrance test conducted largely on the basis of the CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) curriculum. The format indirectly favours CBSE students or those who have taken coaching for NEET. Tamil Nadu also contends that marks obtained in the 12th boards are the best yardstick. It claims that those who secure over 90 per cent in the relevant subjects in the 12th boards are unable to score a higher percentile in NEET and that NEET is unfair to government school students.

The DMK has raised the pitch on the issue, saying that exemption from NEET alone can do away with such disparity and restore the autonomy of states in education. Almost all parties in the state are supporting the DMK's stand of giving admission to medical colleges on the basis of marks in the class 12 qualifying examination. Except the BJP. "NEET has broken the capitation fee mafia and ensured equal opportunity. Abolishing it entails the risk of return [of capitation fee]," says Tamil Nadu BJP chief K. Annamalai. On the issue of disparity, he adds: "A law in Tamil Nadu has brought the state syllabus on par with the CBSE syllabus. The state also provides 7.5 per cent reservation for government school students in admission to professional courses."

Doctors and medical college managements are apprehensive that withdrawing NEET may affect the quality of students and, ultimately, of doctors. They also raise the prospect of private colleges returning to their old ways, including demands for capitation fee. "NEET is a fair way to tap meritorious talent to produce skilled doctors. When states conducted their own tests, there were question paper leaks and other fraud," says Dr K. Ravindranath, founder, Global Hospitals Group, Hyderabad. Other medical experts caution that granting exemption from NEET to one state will have a domino effect and the ongoing efforts to improve the quality of medical education will suffer.

Similar legislation against NEET adopted by the previous AIADMK government was sent back by the President in September 2017. It was not presented for reconsideration within six months. Medical education is in the Concurrent List and the bill may not get assent as it seeks to carve an exception out of a central exam system. If the President declines assent this time, the option before the DMK will be to challenge the constitutional validity of Section 14 of the National Medical Commission Act, 2019, which mandates NEET.

Medical education experts point out how NEET evolved from the earlier ordeal of aspirants in the two-tier selection process—a mix of objective and subjective tests—and how multiple state-level exams have all merged into a single national-level examination. Also, it is alleged that before the introduction of NEET, several self-financing (private) medical college managements would use their clout to access the merit list of government quota seats in Tamil Nadu before the official release and include those names in the private college seats. So, when these students opted to go to a government medical college, the private college managements would rake in huge sums as capitation fees by allegedly 'selling' those seats.

8,000

UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL SEATS in Tamil Nadu in the 2020-21 academic session, of which **55% were in private colleges**

11

NO. OF LANGUAGES, including Tamil, in which NEET is conducted

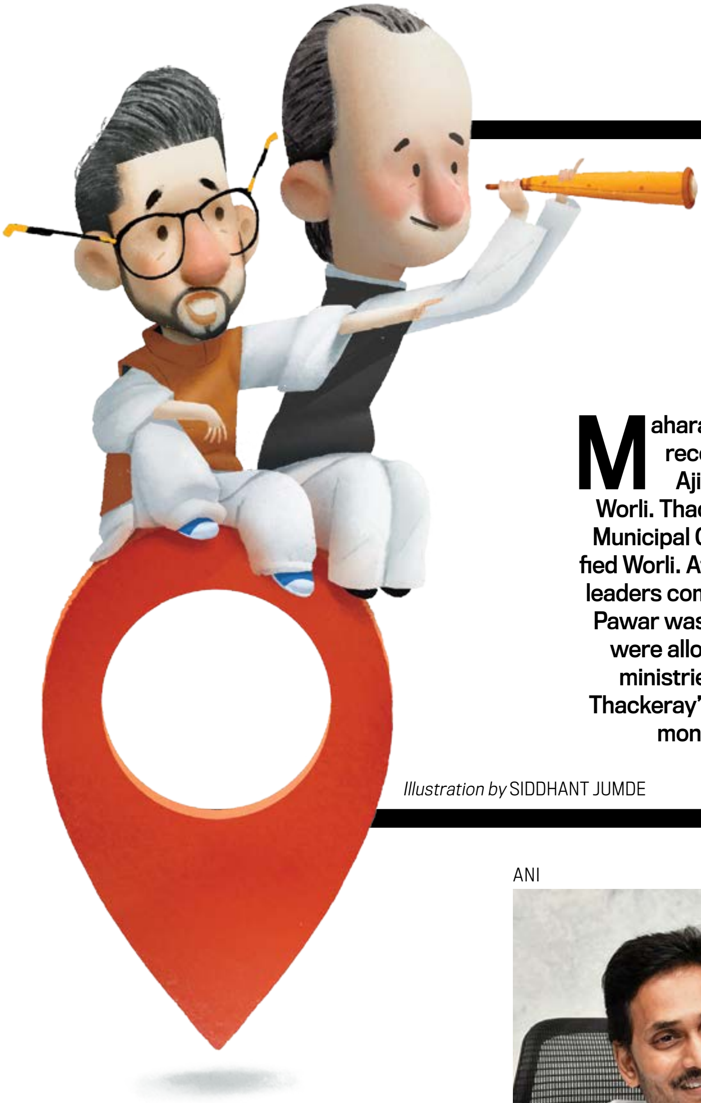
While the introduction of a common entrance test has eliminated such ills, NEET faces challenges of evolving into an enduring nationwide testing system. When the erstwhile Medical Council of India (MCI) introduced NEET in 2013, the Supreme Court had put a stay on it following petitions received against NEET. The court had said that the MCI could not interfere in the admission process. When NEET was reintroduced in 2017 and made mandatory for admission, the Tamil Nadu government slapped an ordinance which sought exemption for medical education aspirants from appearing for the common entrance test. The Supreme Court had, then, directed the Tamil Nadu government to stick to NEET and said there could be no "compromise on intellect".

NEET was initially conducted by the CBSE. While the multilingual nature of the examination allows students from state boards, or those whose medium of instruction is not English or Hindi, to easily attempt the exam, there were goof-ups as well since the regional language question papers were a translation of the paper set in English. For instance, in the Tamil version of the question paper in 2018, 49 questions had errors. The Madras High Court ordered the CBSE to grant 196 grace marks to all students who had appeared for the exam in Tamil. This was later quashed by the Supreme Court. Since 2019, NEET is being conducted by the National Testing Agency, a government entity formed specifically for the purpose of conducting entrance and recruitment examinations.

Many doctors and medical college managements in Tamil Nadu view the opposition to NEET as grandstanding by the state's politicians at the cost of glossing over the advantages of a nationwide common entrance exam. In 2017, following suicide by a student who could not secure a medical seat, the DMK tried to capitalise on the tragedy in its campaign against the entrance examination. "While the rest of India had no such issues, the DMK was pushing hard with their propaganda. The ecosystem they developed played spoilsport by constantly creating a sense of fear," says Annamalai. "Now, after playing dirty politics for four years, the DMK is not in a position to accept the reality."

Stalin, though, may have a case in demanding that NEET be made a greater level-playing field. Exemption from NEET is just one of several issues he is raising under the banner of social justice and state autonomy. Stalin is striving to rally the non-BJP-ruled states to forge a national front. None of them has responded on the NEET exemption demand yet, but with DMK on a strident path, expect the issue to remain politically hot in the days to come. ■

GLASSHOUSE



DRIVING THE POINT HOME

Maharashtra tourism minister **Aaditya Thackeray** recently drove deputy CM and state finance minister Ajit Pawar around his South Mumbai constituency, Worli. Thackeray Jr showed Pawar how the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) had redone roads and beautified Worli. At a virtual meeting that same evening, senior Sena leaders complained to Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray that Pawar was partisan in allocating funds. NCP-run ministries were allocated 49 per cent of the state budget but Sena ministries got only 19 per cent. Was the photo-op then Thackeray's way of telling Pawar that Sena doesn't need his money, it already controls the cash-rich BMC?

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

ANI

A Special Desire

Andhra Pradesh CM **Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy** has consistently spurned offers to join the NDA. His precondition: accord AP special category status (SCS) so that the cash-strapped state can get additional funds. Hopes ran high when the Union home ministry included SCS among inter-state issues to discuss at a meeting with Telangana representatives. Alas, it was dropped at the last minute. The prime minister too recently said that the bifurcation hurt both states. Hope is dead, long live hope.

Building History

Senior Congress leader **Anant Gadgil** has long offered to turn his family home in Pune into an 'inspiration centre'. His party, though, has been cold to the idea. The 90-year-old, two-storeyed mansion was a hub of political activity during the freedom movement. It was also where the Rashtra Seva Dal was conceived. Gadgil, an architect, is running out of patience; he has now started documenting the building's history on his own.

COVERING UP

Cabinet ministers in Madhya Pradesh have a habit of shooting their mouths off, leaving CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan to make amends. Recently, when school education minister **Inder Singh Parmar** hinted that he favoured banning hijabs in government schools, home minister Narottam Mishra had to clear the air next day, saying no such issue was under consideration. Parmar, a Sangh favourite, said later that his words were taken out of context. A warning shot from the CM, perhaps?

–Sandeep Unnithan with Kiran D. Tare, Amarnath K. Menon and Rahul Noronha

MUMBAI POLICE

THE PLOT THICKENS

THE PROTAGONISTS

PARAM BIR SINGH
FORMER MUMBAI POLICE COMMISSIONER

Once a favourite of top politicians, the 1988 batch IPS officer was unceremoniously removed as police chief on March 17, 2021 after investigations made it apparent that his trusted aide, Sachin Vaze, was involved in the Ambani bomb scare case. Singh, who was later appointed DG of Maharashtra Home Guard, went missing for 289 days. He was suspended on December 3, 2021 for dereliction of duty.

THE CHARGES: As head of Mumbai Police Establishment Board, Singh had reinstated Vaze on June 6, 2020 despite a tainted record. Singh made Vaze head of Mumbai police's Crime Intelligence Unit (CIU) on June 9, 2020 by allegedly ignoring rules. He allegedly allowed Vaze to bypass senior officers and directly report to him.

HIS DEFENCE: In an affidavit before the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in December 2021, Singh claimed that Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray and his son Aaditya had pressured him to reinstate Vaze.

LEGAL POSITION: Singh will have to provide evidence to prove his allegations against the Thackerays. He also faces action in five extortion cases.

THE STATUS: Singh remains under suspension. He had surfaced in Mumbai last year after long absence from work but has moved back to hometown Chandigarh.

ANIL DESHMUKH
FORMER MAHARASHTRA HOME MINISTER

The veteran NCP leader became the first high-profile casualty, stepping down on April 5, 2021 after the Bombay High Court directed the CBI to probe corruption allegations made against him by Param Bir Singh. The ED arrested Deshmukh on November 1, 2021 in a case of alleged money-laundering.

THE CHARGES: Deshmukh allegedly asked Vaze and others to extort Rs 100 crore a month from bar/ restaurant owners in Mumbai. In a supplementary chargesheet filed before a special PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act) court in December 2021, the ED claimed Deshmukh had diverted Rs 4.70 crore worth of extorted money to his family-controlled Sai Shikshan Sanstha in Nagpur.

HIS DEFENCE: Deshmukh told the Justice K.U. Chandiwal Commission, which is investigating the extortion case, that he did not know Vaze personally. He claimed Param Bir Singh had masterminded the planting of explosives near Mukesh Ambani's home, and that the officer was removed as Mumbai police chief for concealing facts in the case.

LEGAL POSITION: Deshmukh will have to prove that the source of money transferred to the Sai Shikshan Sanstha was legal.

THE STATUS: Deshmukh is lodged in Mumbai's Arthur Road jail in the money-laundering case.

THE MUMBAI POLICE'S IMAGE TOOK A BEATING WHEN ONE OF ITS OFFICERS, SACHIN VAZE, WAS FOUND INVOLVED IN THE PLANTING OF AN EXPLOSIVES-LADEN SUV NEAR MUKESH AMBANI'S HOME IN MUMBAI ON FEBRUARY 26 LAST YEAR. THE SUV'S OWNER, MANSUKH HIRAN, WAS THEN FOUND MURDERED. THE CASE HAS SINCE GOT MURKIER, WITH THE PROBE EXPANDING INTO ALLEGED MONEY-LAUNDERING AND EVEN A POLICE POSTINGS RACKET. THE TWISTS AND TURNS CONTINUE...

BY KIRAN D. TARE

ANIL PARAB
MAHARASHTRA TRANSPORT MINISTER

The Uddhav Thackeray loyalist is at the centre of a controversy over postings of Maharashtra police officers.

THE CHARGES: On February 3, Anil Deshmukh told ED officials that Parab had provided him unofficial lists of transfer of police officers, which were allegedly forwarded to the additional chief secretary (home) for discussions with the Police Establishment Board. Vaze has told the ED that Parab and Deshmukh had taken Rs 20 crore each for revoking transfers of 10 DCPs made by Param Bir Singh.

HIS DEFENCE: Denying sending any list to Deshmukh, Parab says police transfers are handled by the home department.

LEGAL POSITION: The Chandiwal Commission may summon Parab to record his statement pertaining to the postings of police officers.

THE STATUS: Parab, despite the controversy, continues to enjoy Uddhav's confidence.

ANI

SACHIN VAZE
DISMISSED ASSISTANT POLICE INSPECTOR

The controversial officer was arrested by the NIA (National Investigation Agency) on March 13, 2021 for allegedly planting explosives near Ambani's home and the murder of Thane businessman Mansukh Hiran. As head of the Mumbai police CIU, he had led investigations in sensational cases, such as actor Sushant Singh Rajput's death in June 2020 and the TRP scam later that year. He was dismissed on May 11, 2021. Vaze had joined the Shiv Sena in 2008, but the party claims his membership was not renewed after 2010.

THE CHARGES: An NIA chargesheet in September 2021 states that Vaze wanted to regain his clout as an ace detective/ encounter specialist, following a 16-year suspension in a custodial death case. Vaze, the chargesheet states, conspired to plant the explosives and threat note for Ambani, and was also involved in the murder of Hiran, a key witness.

HIS DEFENCE: Vaze has done several flip-flops on the extortion allegations against Deshmukh. In December 2021, he told the Chandiwal Commission that Deshmukh never asked him to extort bar/ restaurant owners. In a U-turn on February 8, he claimed he had extorted and personally delivered the money to Deshmukh, and also filed an application with the commission to retract his previous statement. "I handed over the cash to people associated with Anil Deshmukh, upon his instructions," he stated.

LEGAL POSITION: The Chandiwal Commission has rejected Vaze's application, suspecting ulterior motives.

THE STATUS: Vaze is lodged in Taloja Central Jail in Navi Mumbai.

राष्ट्रीय
राष्ट्रीय सदस्यत

TOP PLAYER RJD chief Lalu and Tejashwi (in white) at a party membership drive, Feb. 12

ANI

WITH THE RJD MAKING NO CONCESSIONS IN THE RECENT POLLS, THE CONGRESS WAS FORCED TO TAKE ON ITS ALLY

BIHAR

NO LOVE LOST

By Amitabh Srivastava

On February 10, as Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Tejashwi Yadav addressed the party national executive in Patna, he underlined the party's centrality when it came to electoral alliances in the state. He promised to support the Congress on national issues but said it had to let the regional parties call the shots in the states. After more than two decades of a mutually beneficial friendship, the two parties are headed their separate ways.

There has been a decisive shift in RJD-Congress relations since the 2020 assembly election. Twice in the past four months, the RJD has dismissed its ally's demands on seat-sharing. In October 2021, the Congress broke away from the RJD and contested the bypolls held for the Kusheshwar Asthan and Tarapur seats. The ruling Janata Dal (United) won both. Again, now in February, the RJD has refused to accommodate the Congress in the upcoming polls for 24 legislative council (LC) seats, which are to be filled from local bodies' constituencies. The Congress has declared that it may contest all the seats on its own in the March-April election.

The RJD has its reasons for not complying. "If the RJD-led five-party Grand Alliance fell short of a majority in the 2020 assembly poll (it won 110 seats in the 243-member assembly, falling short by 10), it was largely because of the Congress, which contested 70 seats but won only 19," says a senior RJD leader in Patna.

RJD leaders privately admit that unlike Lalu, Tejashwi has little patience with the grand old party. On February 15, Lalu was handed his fifth conviction in as many fodder scam cases, which further supports the assessment that Tejashwi will remain in the driving seat in the party. Congress leaders, however, believe there is more to the RJD's new-found "impatience". "The RJD has hardened its stand since Kanhaiya Kumar's induction into the party, which has not gone down well with them," says a senior leader who did not want to be quoted. Kanhaiya, a former president of the Jawaharlal Nehru University students' union (JNUSU), is often described as a challenger to Tejashwi, the RJD's chief ministerial face.

RJD leaders, though, point to the Congress's thinning vote base. "Tejashwi wants to expand beyond the RJD's traditional Muslim-Yadav support base, which is possible only if he gives more tickets to OBC, EBC and upper caste leaders. So, instead of accommodating the Congress, we could use those seats to expand our social base," says an RJD leader. On February 13, when RJD candidates for 21 of the 24 LC seats came out, 10 were upper castes—five Bhumihar, four Rajputs and one Brahmin.

The Congress, too, is in revival mode. A digital membership drive is planned to double the number of active members, which is under 2 million now in Bihar. But it won't be easy. Over the years, the party's association with the RJD has pushed it to the state's political margins. Its traditional upper caste voters now prefer the NDA. The Congress challenge is clear: any ambitious bounceback plan without the RJD could leave it at the bottom of the electoral food chain. Right now, with 19 MLAs, it has the fourth largest tally in the state Vidhan Sabha. Going solo may erode these numbers, but it may be a risk worth taking for the party's long-term future in Bihar. ■

WEST BENGAL/ TMC

The Shake-Up

By Romita Datta

It started with the party organisational election where Trinamool Congress (TMC) chief Mamata Banerjee was re-elected to the chairperson's post. Ten days later, at a hastily convened meeting on February 12, she disbanded the posts of national general secretary held by her nephew and party No. 2 Abhishek Banerjee, abolished sundry other posts and removed their office-bearers and constituted a 20-member 'national working committee'.

As of now, there is no hierarchy in the new committe, which includes herself, Abhishek and a motley crowd of partymen from diverse backgrounds. Among them are political stalwarts such as Yashwant Sinha and Mamata's trusted loyalists like Amit Mitra, Partha Chatterjee, Firhad Hakim and Aroop Biswas besides leaders like party strongman and Birbhum district president Anubrata Mondal. Sources say Mamata will allocate portfolios by the end of February.

Why this hasty re-engineering of the party set-up? Was it the sense that challenging voices were growing louder in the party, questioning her policies, even her authority?

For sure, Abhishek's rise post-election has created a rift. The 2021 Bengal assembly poll result was a watershed in Trinamool's political history—for the first time, it wasn't an all-Mamata show. Two other people also got credit for the victory, poll strategist Prashant Kishor, who ran the election campaign, and Abhishek. The TMC chief acknowledged the latter's role in the victory by making him the TMC national general secretary and vice-president within a month of the results.

Mamata junked the old posts, including nephew Abhishek's, and has put in place a new 20-member working committee

But Abhishek becoming the party's No. 2 came with an attendant set of problems. The heir apparent wanted to do things differently, advocating the need for reforms in the party such as grooming a second rung of leaders, introducing a 'one man, one post' system and setting an age limit for party candidates. Soon, the veterans started feeling insecure and took up positions behind Mamata. Meanwhile, the young brigade was rallying behind Abhishek, making the generational clash noisy and appearing as if it was a rift between the aunt and nephew. None of the new members in the committe are Abhishek loyalists, except maybe Rajya Sabha MP Sukhendu Sekhar Ray.

As word got around that Abhishek, the Diamond Harbour MP, would step down from the general secretary post to set an example for his one-party, one-post formula (thereby setting a precedent for others, including his aunt), Mamata apparently felt enough was enough. The TMC chief convened the emergency meeting and disbanded all the committees. The present committee is the opposite of all that Abhishek and his youth brigade had been demanding. "The majority are above 65 and also hold multiple posts. And those who are reportedly close to Abhishek have been deliberately dropped. It's a clear sign of take it or leave it," says a senior Trinamool leader, on condition of anonymity. Of course, it's also a committee that ensures a single line of command (read Mamata's).

Not long ago, before the intra-party feud erupted, there was talk that the Trinamool Congress was going for an organisational revamp and that there would be a chairperson and a vice-chairperson. Abhishek was tipped to occupy the latter post. But in his undue haste, he seems to have upset his aunt and the apple cart. ■

DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

GROWING RIFT? Mamata Banerjee with nephew Abhishek (in white) after she was re-elected TMC chairperson, Feb. 2

MADHYA PRADESH

Economic Offensive Wing

By Rahul Noronha

NO APPEALS The Ujjain district administration demolishing a kite shop in Topkhana on January 16

Over the past two years, the Madhya Pradesh government has launched a broad crackdown on crime. However, while this might ordinarily have been a positive development, many say the state's goal is to be seen as handing out punishments, even if there is no direct link between a crime and the person held responsible for it.

In early January, the Ujjain district administration ordered a crackdown on shops selling *manjhas* (powdered glass-coated kite strings), as these can often cause serious accidents. On January 4, three people were booked, including Mohammed Zubair Khan, a 28-year-old resident of Ujjain's Topkhana. Then, on January 15, tragedy struck—Neha Anjana, a 20-year-old woman, bled to death after becoming entangled in a *manjha* that had been abandoned on a road. Anjana's death resulted in officials re-targeting those they had already punished—Khan says he got a notice on January 16 saying his shop was an illegal structure, and part of it was demolished hours later.

However, the situation is not entirely black-and-white. Khan says some of his land had been acquired for a road widening project, and that he had expanded his shop back onto the acquired land. This means the administration was well within its rights to conduct a demolition. However, Khan says many other shops in his locality also encroach onto the road, and his was the only one targeted. Two other *manjha* sellers in Ujjain—Ritik Jadhav and Vijay Bhawsar—also saw their shops demolished the same day. Ajay Dubey, an activist, highlights the ad hoc process, saying, "There may be other properties that are also illegal, but since their owners haven't been accused of a crime, the law turns a blind eye."

With political leaders fully backing such actions, sources say police and administration officials across the state are actively looking to boost their enforcement tallies. The public—perhaps unaware of the ad hocism or indifferent to the complexities of such situations—isn't complaining either.

> **IN MP, PROPERTY DEMOLITION IS NOW THE GO-TO PUNISHMENT FOR A VARIETY OF CRIMES**

Explaining the state's preference for property demolition as a catch-all punishment, a police officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, says, "When a crime is committed, people expect some form of 'justice' to be served instantly. Demolitions are akin to encounters, which often have similar support from the public." Asheesh Singh, DM of Ujjain, adds that demolitions have another justification: "The idea is to hit criminals' finances to weaken them."

The state says such efforts are part of an ongoing 'anti-land mafia' drive. Data from the home department shows 779 cases registered in the past two years against land mafias, with 1,453 encroachments dismantled and 557 acres of government land worth Rs 558 crore recovered. However, the state is also playing fast and loose with the definition of 'mafia'—many of the accused, such as the kite sellers in Ujjain, aren't members of criminal syndicates, just ordinary people on the wrong side of the law. Another problem is that the property demolished sometimes does not belong to the accused, but to a relative, making families pay for the crimes of individual members. Yet another is that punishments often fall only on petty criminals. "If the idea is to hit a mafia's commercial interests," says Dubey, "then the entire chain that benefits from the organised crime should be punished."

Highlighting the legal boundaries, retired Supreme Court Justice Deepak Gupta says, "The police cannot hold anyone guilty—it is for the courts to do so. If demolitions are carried out after following the due process of law, they are legal." MP advocate general Prashant Singh defends the state, saying, "If anyone feels that their rights are being curtailed, they can appeal in court." Others have a different view. "Punishment has to have deterrent effect, but you cannot punish the family of the accused and not the accused themselves," says senior state high court lawyer Siddharth Seth. Punishments also have to be credible to deter crime. And, on that count, the state's ad hoc law enforcement is not a promising sign. ■

आज तक

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कहीं भी, कभी भी

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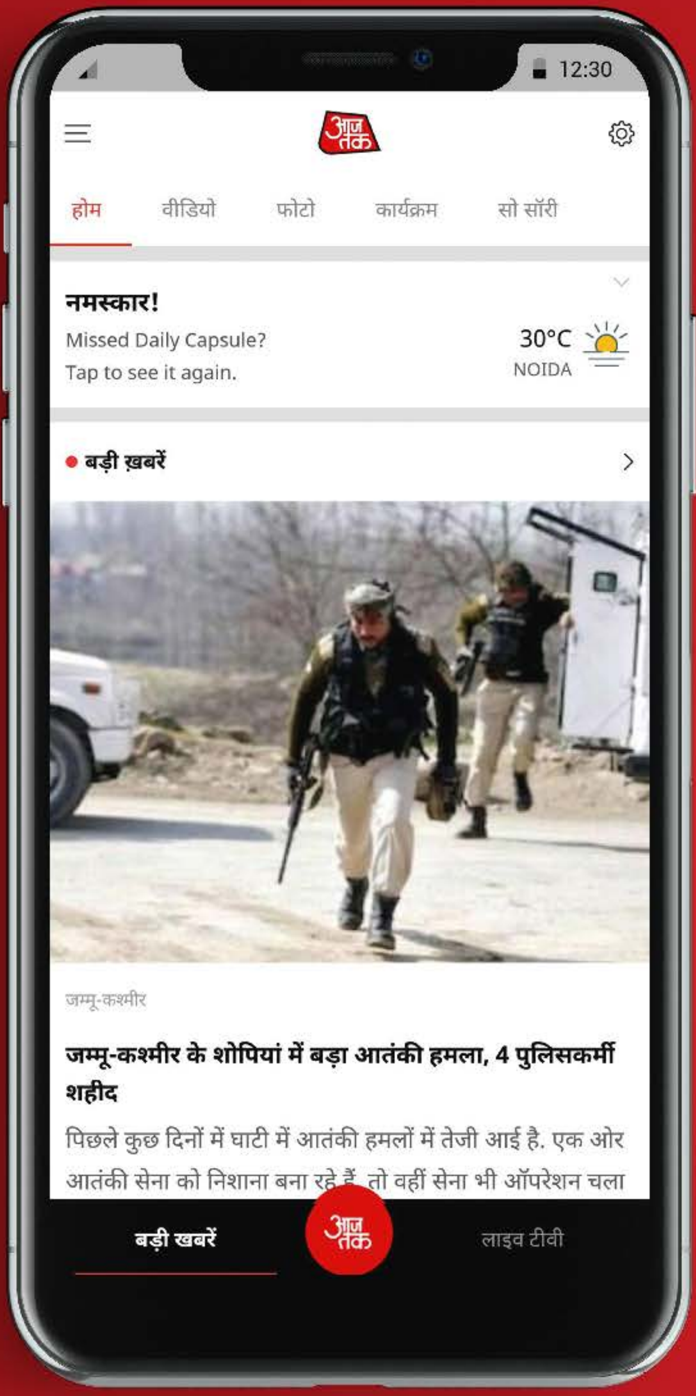

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आज तक

होम वीडियो फोटो कार्यक्रम सो सॉरी

नमस्कार!
Missed Daily Capsule?
Tap to see it again.
30°C
NOIDA

● बड़ी ख़बरें

जम्मू-कश्मीर

जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

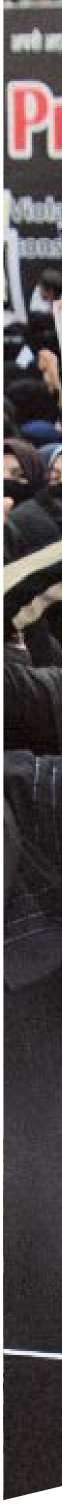
पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

बड़ी खबरें
आज तक
लाइव टीवी

The Hijab Face-off

- SHOULD IT BE BANNED IN SCHOOLS?
- IS IT ESSENTIAL TO THE PRACTICE OF ISLAM?
- HOW WILL THE OUTCOME IMPACT THE NATION?

By **SUNIL MENON** WITH **NABILA JAMAL** IN UDUPI



GETTY IMAGES

ANI

For those to whom the hijab appears as a troubling enigma, it could not have had a more enigmatic wearer than the poet Kamala Das—who converted to Islam for love at age 65 and turned herself into Kamala Surayya. An iconoclast who strung out her inner life in an autobiography shockingly frank on matters of sexuality—so frank that it was censured as a "strip-tease"—ensconced behind the Muslim veil? It was the unlikeliest of controversies to have ruffled India's public life. She passed on in 2009, a mystery wrapped in an enigma, literally. But an unlucky 13 years later, the hijab has been yanked back to centrestage, borne along on a set of seismic events with very many more layers—and vastly higher detonative power. Events that played on the soil of inner and outer lives.

rotest against
YES I AM
HIJAB IS OUR RIGHT HIJAB IS OUR PRIDE
HIJAB IS NOT A PIECE OF CLOTH IT'S OUR DIGNITY

FACES OF PROTEST
Muslim women in Mumbra, Thane, take out a rally against the Karnataka government's decision on the hijab; boys with saffron headgear protest at the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial College in Udupi

It started small. Six girls in their mid-teens, in the coastal Karnataka town of Udupi, were refused permission by their pre-university college (PUs are the equivalent of Plus 2) to don the hijab in class. The truth here comes in many versions but essentially the dispute dates to the monsoon semester of 2020. The girls had just joined as freshers. They wore normal clothes, hijab included, for a few days before everyone bought their uniforms. They sought permission to retain their headscarves over and above it, but in vain—the hijabs had to come off for class. Something sacred for them, how to comport oneself in public, was being violated in public.

A fuzziness covers the rules that enabled the college to trespass onto individual rights thus. It had had a uniform since 2004, but with no written guidelines, certainly no word about things proscribed. (Indeed, Karnataka has a history of allowing an exception for the hijab since Ramakrishna Hegde's time in the 1980s). More importantly, the college's uniform rule rested on rather grey statutory footing. The Karnataka Education Act, 1983—the parent act governing these state pre-university colleges—does not mandate it. Subsequent rules passed under the Act, in 1995, allowed institutions to devise their own rules, including uniforms, with no mandatory clause—confounding the trail with a seeming contradiction. A 2014 circular then brought in a new element: College Development Committees. Anyway, the uniform rule was not very strictly followed, from most accounts, till recent years—roughly coinciding with the time the present MLA, Raghupati Bhat, came to chair the college's CDC.

The second wave put the whole thing in hibernation, along with every other aspect of public life, till the college reopened in October—and the girls renewed their demand. The fahrenheit levels picked up in right earnest around December 29, when the girls started protesting outside the college gates. Initially, a piece of news so minor that it took a month for it to reach even the Bangalore press. But by February, the whole landscape was lit up like a landmine-strewn conflict zone. And it produced a conflagration so huge, in the highly inflammable air of India's political and social life, that the heat could be felt across the country's vast landmass, even beyond.

It was not an equal battle, but exhibited all the crests and troughs of an epic one. From local news, it first migrated to the front pages with intimidating counter-protests by throngs of saffron-wearing male students from colleges in the vicinity. A month into their protest, the girls approached the Karnataka High Court—their desire to wear the attire of their choice was protected under various fundamental rights, they said. It is a noble list: the Right to Equality (Article 14), to Freedom (Art.

A Cover Story

The terms may be used interchangeably, but in fact, the *hijab*, *niqab* and *burqa* are different pieces of Islamic covering, though all designed to protect a woman's modesty. They have in recent years sparked debate around the world, with some militating against this show of religious identity, and others seeing it as a patriarchal imposition on women's bodies, cloaking them in victimhood, and depriving them of choice and agency. The Muslim woman herself is divided: with one half of the sorority discarding it and the other half embracing it as an observation of their faith. But, first, what is the hijab, and its cousins?

GETTY IMAGES

Hijab

The simplest covering, this is essentially a length of cloth used to cover the head and neck, much like the ***ghoonghat*** among Hindu women, who often use the end of the sari to cover their head

Niqab

A starker covering, the *niqab* veils the face and covers the head and neck, but leaves the eyes exposed

ALAMY

Burqa

The most intense covering, it includes a full-body cloak, a veil for the face and a covering for the head, as well as a screen covering the eyes

Chador

A large piece of cloth that is used as a combination shawl/ head covering and face veil

These are only some variations; others include the *shayla* (a long scarf that is used to cover the head and face) and the *abaya* (a long robe-like dress that is usually worn over the clothing). While it is common to see such clothing in black, the colour is not fixed–in Afghanistan, for instance, *burqa*s are often in a shade of blue. The exact cut and style also vary, keeping in mind local customs and climate, alerting us to their evolution in response to cultural and geographic compulsions.

19), to Freedom of Religion (Art. 25), to minority rights (Art. 29). Indeed, under Art. 25, the explicit sanction for the Sikh kirpan in Clause (2)(b)—which protects Sikhs from such state intrusions—can be interpreted as an *illustrative* 'Explanation'. The state responded with a hastily-crafted government order, decreeing a ban on clothes that "disturb equality, integrity and public order" in public schools and PU colleges. Without specifics, it declared that "a uniform style of clothes has to be worn compulsorily". This conferred official sanction ex post facto on the college's uniform—which otherwise was at odds with the original 1983 Act. In effect, it was a ban on the hijab. As 17-year-old Aliya Assadi, one of the original sorority of six, described it to INDIA TODAY plaintively, what was deemed a threat to 'public order' was "just a headscarf, colour-coordinated with our uniform, not covering the face". Now it had been outlawed as if it was some totem of terror.

Before you knew it, a slew of Udupi government colleges, some of whom had earlier allowed the hijab without demur, started ostracising scarved Muslim girls—stopping them at the gates, or making them sit in separate classrooms. National channels started flashing images of hapless girls pleading with their teachers and principals, in vain. Frustration boiled over. At this point, the hijab protests, shadowed by the choreography of anger in saffron, now spread like wildfire across Karnataka districts—Shivamogga, Vijayapura, Gadag, Dakshina Kannada, Davangere, Mysuru, Chitradurga. In Mandya, a lone girl named Muskan became a national meme, facing up to a slogan-shouting mob of saffron-clad boys. State BJP chief and MP Nalin Kateel, a coastal native himself, said Karnataka would not allow "Talibanisation". With tensions riding high, the state closed high schools and colleges for three days.

But the contagion had by now spread to the north—copycat protests were seen in Maharashtra, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The tinderbox-like spaces of social media were abuzz, especially in election-eve Uttar Pradesh. A DMK MP raised the issue in Parliament. The Prime Minister alluded to it. Lawyers, theologians, activists and ordinary people debated it furiously. Unhelpfully, even the real Taliban issued a statement. The cynosure of all eyes now: the legal battle unfolding in the Karnataka HC where the BJP state government, headed by a former socialist who now lip-syncs his new party's lines like a practised thespian, is also one of the disputants.

The core questions at stake are themselves disarmingly simple. Should Muslim girls who choose to wear the Islamic headscarf be debarred from education in public schools and PU colleges? Do state-run educational institutions have the mandate to legislate student attire in a manner that it outlaws any manifestation of religion—visible over and above a stipulated uniform? Was the Udupi college's stand—a de facto ban only on the hijab, since other manifestations of religion like the Hindu *naamam* (*tilak*) on the forehead will stay unaffected—fair, just and kosher in law? Despite their seeming simplicity, the questions are dynamite in contemporary India. Union minister Giriraj Singh, whose Bhumihar *tilak* and *choti* are as unapologetically offered to the world as his words, said without a trace of irony that a Uniform Civil Code was "the need of the hour"—almost as if "uniform" was too tempting a cue. Next, Uttarakhand chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, also facing elections, promised such a code in his state if he returned to power. Answering a query from INDIA TODAY, RSS ideologue Seshadri Chari too iterated that "the Union government is duty-bound to enact a Uniform Civil Code. The Constitution has a provision for it in Article 44 as a Directive Principle".

The Law, Live

Proceedings in the Karnataka HC, attracting record viewership on livestreaming platforms, had taken a curious turn meanwhile—on two counts. The three-judge bench made as if to cool tempers with an interim order that called for status quo—unfairly in some eyes because it equated a religious symbol (hijab) with a political one (saffron shawls) and effectively prolonged the hijab ban (a petition against it failed in the Supreme Court; also, see *The Right to Be Visible*). Having an administrative temper is perhaps neither a court's remit nor its forte. Sure enough, the effect on the ground was near-tragic. As schools reopened on February 14, disturbing visuals of hundreds of hijab-clad girls being asked to leave their campus surfaced from a dozen districts—in Kodagu, a cohort of 43 girls in one go. Even small girls were not spared as hitherto peaceful schools overread the interim order; irate parents clashed with managements in Mandya, Chikkamagaluru, Tumakuru. Many places saw another aspect of shame: teachers and girl students being forced to take off their full burqa on the road, outside the gate, instead of inside one of the rooms, as was their wont. Muslim parents got trolled for putting *deen* before *duniya*—faith before the world—but the real victims were innocent children. The fear of large-scale Muslim dropouts is very real.

But before effecting this flawed status quo, the court also pivoted on an argument presented by the petitioners' lawyers to veer from the simpler questions at hand. Zeroing in on a vastly more complex subject, it framed the question thus: is the wearing of the hijab part of the essential practice of Islam? The exact wording contained the phrase "in the classroom" after "hijab"—lending it the highly specific focus the original incident called for—but no one could miss its potential to be detached from that context and read as a general proposition. Already, via a series of interconnected radials, the case touched all the vulnerable spots of the body politic: religion, identity, gender rights, community relations, electoral politics based around majority/minority conflicts, not to speak of the fundamental rights to various freedoms. A bit like a combustible Matryoshka doll of issues, except that each doll contains all others within it. Whichever way it goes, the Udupi case threatens to become a defining moment in India's constitutional, political, social and legal history—perhaps on the same scale as, and as fraught as, the Shah Bano case. At its centre is a mere headscarf, the hijab. That troubling enigma had changed its status in the case from victim to suspect.

> **The impugned action is not the wearing of the hijab, but the Feb. 5 govt order banning clothes that "disturb equality, integrity and public order"**

Could a reflection of popular misgivings be read into this? Or did the petitioners' lawyers create an opening for this turn? After all, they cited two Kerala High Court judgments—of 2015-16 and 2018 (see *What Courts Have Said*)—to make the ostensibly persuasive claim that wearing the hijab was 'an essential part of Islam'. K.V. Dhananjay, a Supreme Court lawyer from Karnataka, feels they had erred tactically. Asserting that the case was moving into very troublesome territory, he wondered why the petitioners wanted a declaration that wearing the hijab is an essential part of Islam, knowing that it involves matters of such complexity? "This is novel territory for a court," he says. "True, other high courts have dealt with the issue, but in a very summary manner. This bench asked the petitioners' side—and it's a logical, legitimate question—whether *everything* in the Quran was an essential part of the practice of Islam. It's going in unpredictable directions." And tricky. After all, the Supreme Court's 1994 ruling that "mosque is not an essential part of the practice of Islam" had inflected even the Babri Masjid case. Staying on the fundamental rights may have been way safer. As it is, the fuzziness is there within doctrinal Islam itself. The Quran only asks for modesty—explicitly saying believing women must "not reveal their hidden adornments, except what normally appears / Let them draw their veils over their chests" (24:31). This can naturally be interpreted maximally or not (language itself can offer scope for that, see Zafarul-Islam Khan's column for his own translation).

Supreme Court lawyer Shahrukh Alam also feels the juridical pivot was unwarranted. The impugned action, according to her, was not the wearing of the hijab, but the "arbitrary action" of the college and the government order of February 5. It was "filling a vital gap" in the rules, the Advocate-General told the court, arguing for the state. The lawyers for the peti-

The World View

Laws regulating facial coverings in general and *hijabs*, *niqabs* and *burqas* in particular vary vastly across nations. Many western countries have in recent years passed legislation to ban such clothing in public areas; in many Islamic countries, they are not a legal requirement but a cultural expectation

WESTERN WORLD

FRANCE

Beginning April 11, 2011, clothing that covered the face, including *niqabs* and *burqas*, was banned in public areas. *Hijabs* were exempt as they leave the face uncovered

BELGIUM

Belgium too banned the wearing of *niqabs* or other face coverings in 2011 on the grounds of security, arguing that they made policing much more difficult

SWITZERLAND

In 2021, over 51 per cent of Swiss voters were in favour of a referendum to ban the wearing of *niqabs* or *burqas* in public places like roads, shops and restaurants

AUSTRIA

In 2017, Austria banned the use of full facial veils in public places like universities, on public transport and in government buildings like courthouses

UNITED STATES

In 1837, the US Congress had banned all forms of headwear being worn in the house during sessions. In 2019, this was partially repealed to permit religious clothing, after the election of Congresswoman Ilhan Omar

AUSTRALIA

Though there is debate over whether *niqabs* and *burqas* should be banned in public places, in 2021, Australia released a stamp honouring frontline Covid warriors, including a doctor in a *hijab*

NEW ZEALAND

In 2020, the New Zealand police updated its uniform to include a *hijab*, in an effort to attract more Muslim women

ISLAMIC NATIONS

SAUDI ARABIA

Though *hijabs*, *niqabs* and *burqas* are very common in Saudi Arabia, in 2018, crown prince Mohammed bin Salman said the only Islamic requirement was that women wear 'decent, respectful clothing'

IRAN

The *hijab* has been compulsory for women since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Reportedly, a law passed in 1995 allows authorities to jail women for up to 60 days if found without a veil in public

PAKISTAN

In 2019, authorities in Peshawar and Hamirpur reportedly directed educational institutions to ensure all female students wore *abayas*. After protests, this was revoked

INDONESIA

In 2021, Indonesia banned public schools from enforcing religious dress codes, after it was revealed that some non-Muslim students and teachers were being forced to wear *hijabs*

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORY

tioners gestured at a more fruitful way to fill the "vital gap": in 2012, the centrally-run Kendriya Vidyalaya schools had issued uniform guidelines where Muslim girls who so desired could wear a "grey-coloured headscarf, matching with the bottom wear, with a red hem". Why could the state not follow suit? Still, even if the idea that a headscarf could pose a law and order problem were to be offered seriously, the onus on the state would have been to quell it—not to victimise the scarf. Karnataka home minister Araga Dnyanendra, instead, was reported endorsing the de facto hijab ban with the line that schools and colleges must "inculcate Indian values". Unbeknownst to him perhaps, the Muslim wing of the RSS in MP had solved that particular conundrum, declaring the hijab to be "Indian attire".

The vital gap, of course, could lie elsewhere. What needs to be scrutinised is the act of the state and that of the institution in prescribing the uniform in the first place—whether access to education can be thus regulated. "The students are impugning those acts," says Alam, "they are not the ones who should be subjected to scrutiny." In the end, said another lawyer close to the petitioners, what could have been settled at a lower, lighter end of the scale—"as a purely administrative question"—has been taken to a zone that's "risky for the court, the communities involved, and the country itself, even if the court has been careful to delimit it strictly to the domain of the classroom, thus ringfencing it from loose interpretations of a wider ban".

Ground Zero Dark Thirty

A domino effect may be difficult to stop though—especially when more than one side seems to want it. A few decades ago, it might have beggared belief to imagine that, in 2022, Udupi would witness the spectacle of a slogan war between hijab-clad girls and saffron-shawled boys. But the ground for that had been created through assiduous efforts. Coastal Karnataka has been a wall-to-wall laboratory for Hindutva for long now, with many infamous incidents to its credit, and a matching communal upsurge from the other side. The Kerala-born Popular Front of India (PFI), whose Islamist radicalism has been the lightning rod for heated debates in recent years, was in the thick of action in the present controversy via affiliates like the Campus Front of India (CFI).

"These are actually two distinct movements, totally unconnected to each other at their core," says author and political commentator Shajahan Madampat. He sees the hijab affair as part of the newest strategy of the Hindutva project, its determination to erase all markers of Muslim identity and presence in India, after beef lynchings, CAA-NRC, changing the names of cities et al. That process of erasure, he says, is part of the Modi regime's policy and it is inappropriate to bring in other questions about the hijab into that frame: its desirability or otherwise, its orthodoxy. At the same time, he advocates a careful look at this region of Karnataka. "If you map the growth of Islamic puritanism across India, coastal Karnataka would be far ahead of any other region, with a much higher prevalence of phenomena like the face veil," he says. Talking of his native place, Malappuram, in Kerala, he says you see manifestations of orthodoxy there, not fanaticism. And contrasts it with Bhatkal, Karnataka, and its "terror" historysheet. "That's an integral part of the social churn going on across the Udupi coast," he says, "up to Kasaragod in Kerala, which has fed this game of competitive radicalisation." Ahammed Ashraf, an intellectual aligned with Islamic liberation theology, shares the disquiet—finding it difficult to endorse the response to the "cultural and political threat of Hindutva" from sections of Karnataka's

What Courts Have Said

In a recent interview, Supreme Court senior advocate Sanjay Hegde noted that there is no clear precedent on whether girls can wear *hijabs* in classrooms because there is no legislation on this specific issue. He also highlighted that past rulings by various courts are specific to the context of the petitions they were hearing, and that finding a middle ground between individual and institutional rights is a constant balancing act. A list of rulings...

1954: SHIRUR MUTT CASE
One of the earliest cases dealing with religious freedom, the Supreme Court judgment in this case laid down a ‘doctrine of essentiality’ to draw a line between ‘essential’ and ‘non-essential’ religious practices, to identify those protected by the Constitution. This has played a role in other cases, such as the 2018 Sabarimala temple judgment

2002: FATEHMA HUSSAIN CASE
When a young Muslim student was asked by the principal of her school to stop attending classes if she insisted on wearing a head scarf, she petitioned the Bombay High Court, saying the school’s order violated her right to freely practice her religion. The court noted that she studied in an all-girls’ school, and upheld the school’s position that she adhere strictly to the official uniform

2015: NADHA RAHEEM CASE
Two Muslim students petitioned the Kerala High Court, saying the CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) dress code for exams—a half-sleeve kurta—violated their religious customs, which required a full-sleeve dress and a headscarf. The CBSE said the dress code was to prevent cheating, arguing that full-sleeve clothing or a headscarf could be used to conceal electronic devices. The court ruled that the students be allowed to dress according to their customs, but that they should appear half an hour early at the exam centre so that they could be checked

2016: AMNAH BINT BASHEER CASE
The Kerala High Court issued a judgment on a similar matter where the petitioner, a Muslim student appearing for the All-India Pre Medical Entrance Test, petitioned the court, saying the exam’s dress code violated her right to practise her own faith as laid down in Art. 25. The court ruled that the dress code could not be enforced, but that the petitioner should appear early at the exam centre so she could be checked by invigilators

ANI

Muslim populace. “Those reactions will only help the BJP grow,” he says. Hindutva cannot be met on a purely political battlefield, it has to be via a newly fashioned cultural politics, according to him. And India’s Muslim community, their organisations and leaderships—just like India’s Dalits, avarnas and Adivasis—are at present not equipped for that fight, he feels. “They have internalised the BJP-RSS’s thought processes.”

Social scientist Shiv Visvanathan extends that analytical ground. Pointing out that Karnataka had all the makings of a progressive state, he feels it is regressing of late, in devastating ways, and it’s “not just about the BJP”. He says the minorities, for the first time, are discovering fetishisable facets to their minorityhood. “The stamp of identity is no longer citizenship, it is minorityhood,” he says. Its most visible marker is the dress, and the unfortunate part is that it is being imposed on their school- and college-going children. “It’s almost like a costume ball—and then that artificial drama of the alternative costume, saffron shawls,” he adds.

In the midst of all the politics, no one is really thinking about education. Aliya and Shifa, another one of the six girls, voice their angst forcefully. “We are also tax-paying citizens. Why don’t we have equal rights? Why are they making us sit in different classrooms, forcing only us to take online classes? We don’t want to be singled out,” they say. They have refused to take online classes, and exams are next month. Vani Tripathi, CBFC (Central Board of Film Certification) member and pro-right in her views, finds this aspect to be the real tragedy in a socio-political sense. For her, the overarching reality is that Muslim women in India are not seen as mainstream in terms of education and if a young Muslim girl is finding a channel of education, “one should abet that tremendous courage and journey she makes. That should never be challenged.”

Visvanathan too highlights this. “Education already comes with anxiety,” he says. “On that turf, you’re forcing a conflict, even schools are being turned into problematic territory, and the political parties are manipulating that for five extra votes!” He believes they are trying to change the south. “Karnataka had a wealth of intellectuals, from Ananthamurthy to Shivaram Karanth,” he says. “Now, name one intellectual who stood up and said anything.” Visvanathan feels the situation could have been defused easily, but is not sure if anyone wants to solve the problem. “The court is dithering; it’s sticking to etiquette, acting as if it’s objective. We’re not looking for objectivity, we’re looking for truth.” What happens to the children who get turned out of school because of the interim order, he asks, equally blaming the educational institutions for cowardice. “Will they dare to remove a bindi? Let’s face it. The hijab doesn’t harm, doesn’t intrude. It’s not dangerous. Yes, it’s a statement of identity but it’s also a celebration of the fact that so many Muslim girls are attending school.” A celebration that may well be striated by mourning now.

Veiled Questions

The Indian public had already been handed a new bogey: the hijab. But the subjective experience of its wearer is rarely ever accounted for. Most hijabi women speak of convenience and freedom (Kamala Das did so too), but that functional aspect clearly does not exhaust all possibilities. The attire is itself beset with terminological confusions. The word ‘hijab’ refers only to the innocuous headscarf, but it has come to stand in for the whole gradation of Islamic women’s attire (see *A Cover Story*)—a semantic function once served by the hold-all term ‘purdah’, from whose teasing intrigue Urdu poets have extracted plenty of amorous value. Innocent love has been a scarce commodity in India of late: the Islamic veil now channels hate, or predatory animus. At the centre of this is the curious duality of the full-body veil—it seeks to withdraw the wearer from the sexual economy of attraction, to invisibilise her body, but also renders her highly visible in public spaces where the attire is not the default norm. To hide, and yet to be seen: that is the curse that befalls the veiled Muslimah in contemporary India. Coming close on the heels of the Sulli Deals/Bulli Bai controversy, no one missed the theme of public disrobing that played out outside Karnataka's school and college gates. No wonder more than one commentator was drawn into invoking the Draupadi metaphor. The veil specifically disturbs the 'normal' economy of the body, the usual channels of social interchange, so it stirs what has often been seen as a latent psychological motive for the Hindu right: a secret desire for war conquest.

On the other side, the hijab is perhaps also about doing battle: a symbol of defiance, rather than subjugation, from an oppressed minority. In politically besieged times, it has become a part of the vocabulary of dissent. As a marker of religion, asserting one's identity even more wilfully in the face of threat can come to be seen as a noble act in itself. That is perhaps why the hijab-clad woman is, paradoxically, being celebrated by a section of feminists, despite familiar critiques of the hijab as a sign of patriarchy. This is tricky and complex territory, and nowhere have the hijab debates been more intense perhaps than among Muslim feminists—some of it openly on social media, some in closed Whatsapp groups. Often driven to voice their anguish among peers at this regression into what they see as a sign of pre-modern female subservience, anti-hijab feminists who have fought for decades to free women from the attire are wary of expressing their dissent openly at this critical hour (one even turned down a request for a column). That's why K.V. Dhananjay quips that "some progressive Muslim women may even be secretly hoping that the petitioners lose the case", so that a ruling in affirmation of the hijab being 'an essential part of Islam' does not set them back by decades. Alam explicates the nuance, "In either case, the court will take away the woman's agency. Either by negating their right to wear a hijab, or by making it mandatory." On the opposing side, gender activists are perhaps being forced by circumstance, ironically, into the exact place where a PFI might want them: endorsing the hijab unconditionally. At one level, the larger context of Hindutva may be thwarting the organic evolution of progressive streams within Islam. And one of the refrains of the feminist movement—the idea that gender issues cannot be deferred for a better time, and that "there is no good time"—may be under a bit of strain.

The larger context of Hindutva may well be thwarting the organic evolution of progressive streams within Islam

Ghazala Jamil, who teaches law and governance at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, would rather not allow extrinsic circumstances to define what, for her, is a clear zone of choice. She sees it as a huge learning moment for the feminist movement, and feels many feminists have indeed evolved a lot in the recent past. The question for her is one of autonomy. "If there are women who are forced to wear *any* dress," she says, "then it's their struggle to shed it. But if there are women who *want* to wear it, and they are being disrobed, it's another thing entirely. Traditional feminists who still peddle the old stock idea that women who want to wear the hijab don't know what they're talking about—don't have agency, or intelligence—haven't learnt much in a changing world."

The contemporary scenario—Karnataka being an example—can seem puzzling at first glance. The spectacle of tens of thousands of young Muslim women in hijab or even the full-body veil, including in places where it was never a traditional attire, stands out on the social landscape. In conversations for this article, respondents from places as varied as eastern UP, the Malvani coast and the heart of Mappila Kerala attested that they never saw their mothers and grandmothers in anything like the full burqa. Madampat, for instance, says: "I come from a very orthodox Salafi family, in a village in Malappuram. My mother is a retired schoolteacher, 71 now. I have only ever seen her in a sari, except with long-sleeved blouse and a *makkana* (scarf). The burqa was non-existent in my region till the 1990s, except for Hajj-returned ladies and women of the region's highest clerical family, who claim Saudi origin. Now the place swarms with it. The thing is that Saudi-inspired Salafi Islam commands only 10 per cent of Muslims, but their influence nowadays is widespread on the rest, what we call customary Islam."

There's obviously a polyvalency at play here. In one sense, what's derided as 'Arabisation'—seen as a kind of exhibitionist Islamism—is also an aspect of globalisation. Hijabs and abayas styled by big designer labels are another. But as design theorist Otto von Busch says, even fashion is like a totalitarian state: "Peers police each other and deploy acts of judgement, peer regulation and micro violence to uphold the aesthetic order of fashion supremacy." Whatever else you say about Kamala Surayya, she may not have fallen into the category of fashion victim. Her inner journey apparently didn't end too well; confidantes suggest she only barely stopped short of apostasy. As with all veiled truths, we don't know. ■

—With Aditya Wig

Behind the Veil

The controversy around students wearing the hijab has sparked a larger debate centred around cultural dress codes, institutional authority, personal choice and bigotry

ZAFARUL-ISLAM KHAN

An Islamic scholar, Khan studied at Al-Azhar (Cairo) and has a PhD in Islamic Studies from Manchester University. His English translation of the Quran is slated for a 2022 release.

MODESTY & MODERNITY

In Islam, both men and women are required to dress modestly and follow certain norms to uphold a moral social order. In common usage, the word 'hijab' (Arabic for veil) is used to refer to a head scarf—often a part of modest attire. The term itself has more metaphorical range, broadly denoting the modest dress code Muslim women should observe in the presence of men outside their immediate family. The veil is not unique to Islam—versions of it can be found in ancient civilisations, Semitic religions and Hinduism, as well as in pre-Islamic Arabia, where it was used to differentiate 'free women' from slaves. In the Quranic context, the hijab encourages modesty, both physical and spiritual.

The actual guidance in the Quran directs Muslim women to cover their whole body, except hands and face: "believing women...should lower their gaze and guard their chastity; they should not display their beauty [and ornaments] except what [ordinarily] appears thereof; they should draw their scarves over their neck-openings and not display their beauty..." (24:31, author's translation). The Quran uses the word 'khimar', meaning a piece of cloth covering the head—local names like chador refer to its variations. A stricter form of hijab, covering the whole body, including the face, and limiting interactions with male strangers, was promulgated only for the 'Mothers of the Faithful', i.e. the wives of Prophet Muhammad (33:32,53). They were held to a higher standard, and believers were enjoined to speak to them from behind a veil or curtain.

In Islam, both men and women must cover certain parts of their bod-

Illustration by TANMOY CHAKRABORY

In pre-Islamic Arabia, the veil was used to differentiate "free women" from slaves. In the Quranic context, the hijab encourages modesty—physical and spiritual

ies in front of strangers (24:30-31). These parts are called 'satr' or 'awrah', which is the whole body except the face and hands for women, and the area from the knees to the navel for men. Some women choose to cover their faces and hands too, but it is not scripturally mandated.

A woman may observe hijab by wearing a cloak (jilbab) and donning a khimar over her head. Hijab is relaxed in certain situations, like when seeing a doctor, or while appearing in front of a ruler or judge to give witness or file a complaint. Even within a house, members are expected to respect each others' privacy and modesty. Residents of a home, except young children, should not enter anyone else's private room without permission (24:58-59).

Niqab, the full body veil, crept in during later centuries. Full veiling became pervasive only under the long Ottoman rule over large parts of Muslim lands, even then originally as something observed by the aristocracy. Working women could not afford to observe the impractical niqab, but an inevitable downward percolation started as the other classes tried to emulate the elite—encouraged by the more orthodox Salafi clergy. As part of the larger ummah tied to a cultural-religious commons centred around the holy lands, and influenced by figures like the 18th century theologian Shah Waliullah and Salafi schools like Ahl-e-Hadith established in the mid-19th century, the Indian subcontinent was not immune to these transactions of ideas and practices. The full body veil, as mandated attire, has been strongly refuted by many scholars, including one of the great Hadith scholars, Nasir al-Din Al-Albani, in his book *The Hijab of the Muslim Woman*. In general, women in most Muslim societies observe hijab with ordinary clothes; the niqab is uncommon today. The stricter hijab saw a resurgence after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, both in 1979, and in Egypt at about the same time. Some orthodox Muslims and Salafis still insist on it, though their patron, Saudi Arabia, has officially relaxed it. In recent years, fashion-conscious Muslim women have taken to different types of head coverings, like turbans. Fashion houses, too, have introduced stylish veils for the western and Gulf markets. In general, many women who observe hijab find it practical and liberating, helping them avoid harassment on the streets and in workplaces. ■

HASINA KHAN

The author is a feminist activist and founder member of the Bebaak Collective

POLITICS OF INFLUENCE

The Karnataka school's sudden decision to ban girls wearing hijab from entering its premises reeks of a conspiracy directed at Muslims. In the name of gender empowerment, they are out to build a narrative in which the entire fault lies with the Muslim community, all other communities are fine. They want to demonstrate that schools should have discipline, they should have a uniform.

I do think that schools should have a uniform, and that every student, whatever his or her religion, should adhere to it. But what was the school management doing till now with students who were turning up wearing their religious identity? How can they be stopped suddenly? Was there any disciplinary action? Was there a circular sent out by the school? The suddenness of the decision makes it seem like a political conspiracy. At present, four states are going to elections, including Uttar Pradesh, a very important state.

I'm a feminist activist. I'm aware that a woman's body is where patriarchal structures play out politics of religion without consent. And this is true for all religions. As for Muslims, as per Article 25, everyone has the right to practise their religion and the burqa is part of that expression of faith. The question is: do women have the power to choose the clothes or the colours they want to wear? They don't.

This is where "influence" comes in. Muslim women are influenced by their religious identity. After the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, there were riots across the country. I was a close witness to the riots in Mumbai. Muslims were victims of communal violence, of social and economic displacement and our very existence came under threat. It bred a lot of discussion in the community. Among the questions asked was whether we were being targeted because we were a minority. To overcome that, it was decided that we would display our numbers. The skullcap, the beard and the burqa became the means to exhibit this numerical strength.

> **Banning the burqa for gender empowerment is an excuse. We are moving towards a Hindu rashtra where democracy is restricted only to elections**

It was Islamic fundamentalism being pushed by radical organisations whose agenda was to control women's clothing, mobility and thought. At the same time, however, these very organisations were also the ones helping the victims of the riots. The helping hand, though, also gets the upper hand. That power played a huge role in determining how religion should be enforced and how women had to be symbols of its dignity. And the community more or less accepted these diktats since it was linked to their social security. It is a politics against which I have fought for 35 years now.

I come from a background where no one wears a burqa in the family. No one even wore a burqa in my Urdu-medium school. But, after 1992, I saw a sudden change. Women, including girls as young as four or five, started wearing a burqa. And today, if you speak against it, you will likely face boycott and suffer, possibly at the hands of your own family. I don't want to wear the burqa, my body is my body, no one can impose on it without my consent or use it for religious/ political reasons. But I was in Mumbai, an urban city. I was given the power to express a different opinion. But today if you ask a young girl not to wear a burqa, what will her view be? Her mother, grandmother, everyone in the neighborhood is wearing it. It is then not a question of choice, but a matter of influence. I don't think it can be reversed that easily.

Which brings us back to the Karnataka government's decision. What is its point? If you are asking one section to not wear the burqa, then you must ask everyone to not wear the *ghoonghat*, *bindi*, *mangalsutra*. If you want to bring uniformity, then bring it everywhere. Gender empowerment is just an excuse. We are moving in the direction of a Hindu rashtra where democracy is restricted only to elections.

Girls should be allowed to study, engage in conversation, given space, made to feel confident. If you place restrictions on them, they will answer with defiance.

We are against the burqa, but forcing girls to remove it is very, very wrong. The community is already socio-economically weak and women are stepping out having overcome great difficulty to study, to build an identity. Now, the government wants to force them indoors by promoting fear? Who is this gender empowerment for? Depriving women of education on the basis of the burqa, I feel, is very dangerous. ■

PURUSHOTTAM AGRAWAL

The author is a historian of ideas and scholar of Hinduism. His latest book is Kabir-Kabir. *He is currently working on a book about Hinduism*

HIJABS OF THE MIND

The most interesting, rather instructive, aspect of the Udupi 'hijab controversy' has been the way young Hindus chose to register their protest by underlining their own religious identity. "If you are allowed to don the hijab, then we must be allowed our saffron," they said, through word or action. This way, they—rather, their instructors and mentors—managed to direct public imagination to the larger issue of perceived 'Muslim appeasement'. The hijab would be seen as yet another 'undeserved concession' to Muslims, which must be nipped in the bud. The controversy became a timely vehicle for the BJP to put across its ‘anti-appeasement’ message in the ongoing elections in Uttar Pradesh and other states. It may or may not work, but Hindutva forces can reasonably hope this controversy will add ballast to their ‘Muslim appeasement’ rhetoric. But there is something more important here for Hindutva: it gives them yet another device to further their fantasy of converting Hindus into a ‘centrally guided’ (if not controlled) community, in the Semitic fashion. This is the aim with which the RSS was established in 1925, and is also the gist of Savarkar’s theory—“Hindutva is not identical with what is vaguely indicated by the term Hinduism”.

The central characteristic of Hinduism is a diversity of practices, and the absence of any clearly defined core theological dogma. Hence Savarkar is right, it is indeed not identical with what is insistently circled off by the term Hindutva. The hijab may or may not be prescribed by the Quran or the Sharia—that is for the Islamic theologians and laity to settle. But this much is clear: the Dharmashastras, any of the numerous Hindu law books, certainly do not mandate any kind of special denotative attire, whether saffron headgear or shawl. Elements of attire may be part of social etiquette, protocol and convention, but certainly not as religious obligation. The coexistence of a multiplicity of (even sharply opposed) theological positions, social practices and aesthetic openness towards the body has been a happy outcome of Hinduism not being a ‘religion of the book’, and that constitutes the most formidable challenge to the Hindutva dream of converting it into a mirror image of the ‘adversary’—i.e. Islam or Christianity.

When regressive practices, specially those affecting women, reappear around us through voluntary adoption by women, progressive society must question it

Illustration by TANMOY CHAKRABORY

One thing to ponder over for those who see religions as monoliths: have even ‘religions of book’ like Islam really remained unaffected by historical evolution? The answer is all around us, for everyone to see. Nostalgia for ‘past glory’ may seem a fine and harmless thing, but is it realistic or even desirable to travel backward in time? To reach for an ever-elusive prelapsarian state? Even as a response to real or perceived threats to one’s cultural self? Can it be denied that changes in the material conditions of life radically change the way a society lives and imagines itself? Just a couple of centuries ago, in India, women’s education was a fond dream for some, a cultural nightmare for others. Sati was a reality. In the American south, the lynching of ‘Negros’ and the denial of voting rights to women was ‘normal’ till the early 20th century. All that has changed irreversibly. And there must be no nostalgia.

The idea of ‘choice’ has to be put in perspective here. What we are seeing globally, across religions that were otherwise in a state of organic evolution, is a retreat of modernity—neither Hinduism, nor Islam is immune. When regressive practices, particularly those affecting women, reappear through voluntary adoption by women—take the hijab, or karwa chauth fasting—we must see through the conditioning masquerading as choice. The job of a progressive society—of scholars of religion, society and gender—is to penetrate the veil, to persuade young people against it. Violent harassment of young girls, of course, is no way to do this. It will harden attitudes all around—for demonology always hides a secret desire to emulate the ‘other’. ■

MEJINDARPAL KAUR
The writer is International Legal Director, UNITED SIKHS

THE RIGHT TO BE VISIBLE

The ongoing hijab row has left us shocked. The hijab is worn globally by Muslim women in public places, including schools. It is even more shocking that the debate is unfolding in India, a land where many religions were founded and where religious freedom has existed for aeons, since well before the Indian Constitution provided for it. It is for this religious freedom that the sixth Sikh guru, Sri Guru Teg Bahadurji, gave his life 347 years ago, so Kashmiri Pandits may wear their *janeyu*. He did it without questioning if the *janeyu* is an essential requirement of *sanatan dharma*, let alone if it is discriminatory. And his father, Guru Hargobind Sahibji, built the Guru Ki Maseet for Muslims in Hargobindpur, during the Mughal period.

There is no jurisprudential reason for the hijab to be banned in India's educational institutions. The interim order of the Karnataka High Court has imposed a de facto hijab ban on affected Muslim students when there is no legal basis for it; it has also effectively violated their fundamental right to education. This violation could have been avoided. The high court could have ordered the affected institutions to accommodate their female Muslim students by providing them an alternative and safe place to study within their premises, until the case is disposed of. It is also unhelpful that the Supreme Court has refused to expedite a hearing of a petition filed against the high court's interim order. UNITED SIKHS has filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to take cognisance of this matter as this is a contravention of India's Constitution which protects the right to practice one's faith and the right to education.

> **Freedom of religion or belief is a private right in a public place. You cannot expect a person to hold a belief or to practise his/ her religion on a part-time basis**

Freedom of religion or belief is a private right in a public place. You cannot expect a person to hold a belief or to practise his/ her religion privately and on a part-time basis, as it would be antithetical to the universality of the religion or belief. The same must apply to manifesting one's belief or religion. One practises one's belief or religion by manifesting it in one's life. Religious minorities often stand out visibly when the manifestation of their religion creates an identity that goes against the default. Sikhs have not been discriminated against in the West because of their visibility but because of an ignorant public. In India, a turbaned Sikh makes the public feel safe, especially in a context where crimes against women are rife. Women in hijab must, likewise, be looked upon with respect as people who are faithful to their precepts.

It is settled international law that it is not the business of a secular court to determine what is an essential religious requirement. As long as a religious belief is genuine, a secular court is bound to accept it. In 2018, our legal team filed a petition in the Indian Supreme Court against a turban ban imposed by a cycling association on a Sikh cyclist. During the hearing, the bench asked: "Is the turban a requirement of the Sikh religion?" We were taken aback at the question, for it suggested the court was not prepared to take judicial notice of the widespread social understanding about the centrality of turbans in Sikh attire. We were not upset. Instead, we spent long and fruitful hours going through Sikh scriptures and historical texts to satisfy the judges.

In the West, the Sikhs willy-nilly became the target of hate crime and laws enacted in response to 9/ 11. The public had been told that the 9/11 terror was perpetrated by turbaned men. The ignorant public transferred their fear to turbaned Sikhs. The concern for security at airports and other public venues led to indiscriminate searches of turbans and the kirpan was targeted as it triggered metal detectors. Sikhs had to fight for the right to not be discriminated against for wearing their articles of faith. The UNITED SIKHS legal team filed three communications at the UNHRC in 2008 against France's ban on the turban in schools and for ID photos. We won all three cases but France has ignored the UNHRC's determination and the ban continues. ■

The ill-fated family, Jagdish Patel, wife Vaishaliben and their children Vihangi and Dharmik in an undated photo

THE BIG STORY | ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

GUJARAT'S SECRET HUMAN PIPELINE

Illegal immigration from Gujarat to the US is on the rise. **Hopefuls risk death, exploitation and human traffickers** to reach the promised land

By Kiran D. Tare in Gujarat

A 15-feet-high archway with murals of mounted warriors is a dead giveaway of the dominant community in Dingucha village in Gujarat's Gandhinagar district. The state's Patel community usually erects these structures to commemorate their warrior ancestors. The village, just 60 km from state capital Gandhinagar, has a population of around 3,500. Most of them live in double-storeyed concrete houses, with Royal Enfield bikes and Bolero SUVs parked outside. Several families from here have migrated to the United States over the past few years, but they haven't forgotten their roots. The village has a health centre, a high school and a grand three-storeyed Ram temple, all of them built from grants, or what sarpanch Madhurji Thakor calls "NRI money".

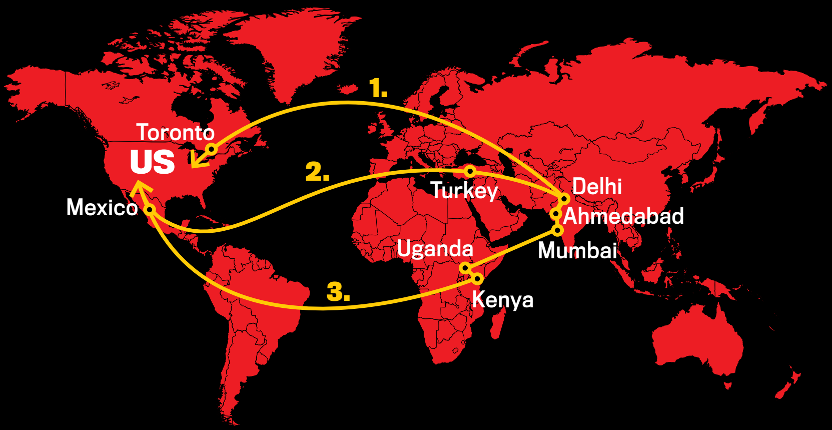
DODGY TRAILS

Travel agents use three routes to get illegal migrants into the US

1. AHMEDABAD-DELHI-TORONTO-US

This route has become more popular as reaching Canada on a valid visa seems more comfortable than the Turkey route. Canada is also a popular student destination now, so you can enrol in a college there first and later sneak into the US.

Time taken: 6 months



2. AHMEDABAD-DELHI-TURKEY-MEXICO-US

The most popular route. Illegal immigrants do not face any trouble for they reach Mexico on a valid visa. The porous Mexico-US border makes the unauthorised entry into the US a simple step

Time taken: 2-3 months

3. AHMEDABAD-MUMBAI-UGANDA-KENYA-MEXICO-US

Uganda and Kenya have a large population of Gujarati origin people. The illegal migrants work there for some time on a valid visa, then move to Mexico on a travel visa

Time taken: 1-2 years

MODUS OPERANDI

Most Gujaratis settled in the US recruit labour from their native place. They allegedly also facilitate the illegal smuggling

SPONSOR

A prospective US employer. Sponsor contacts relatives in Gujarat and offers them a job in the US. Often also takes care of expenses in smuggling the person into the US. Money is repaid once he/she starts earning.

FILE

Key word in north Gujarat referring to documentation needed for a US visa. A Patel community leader says youths waste years waiting for a visa. Some finally take the illegal route.

AGENT

The Gujarat police suspects a wide network of agents in Ahmedabad and north Gujarat who lure the youths. Agents are connected to middlemen in Mexico, Canada and the US.

STUDY CENTRES

Hoardings in Gandhinagar are full of ads on how to study in the US and Canada. The counsellors reportedly guide many clients on the 'illegal route'.

RELIGIOUS CENTRES

Many Gujaratis have illegally stayed back in the US to work in local temples. Their travel visa expired a long time back but a nexus with local authorities helps.

Source: Gujarat Police, community leaders

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

On January 19, it was this American connect that fetched Dingucha international attention. Four residents of the village—Jagdish Patel, wife Vaishali, daughter Vihangi and son Dharmik—were found frozen to death over 11,000 km away in Manitoba on the Canada-US border. They had reportedly planned to walk into the US with 11 other Gujaratis, without valid documents. They wore heavy winter coats, masks and gloves to protect them from temperatures which fell 35 degrees below freezing, but were tragically separated from the larger group. The family "faced not only the cold weather but endless fields, large snowdrifts and complete darkness", Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) assistant commissioner Jane MacLatchy told the media on January 22. Their bodies were found just a kilometre away from the US border. The family had set out from Gujarat to Canada on valid tourist visas in late December.

The day after the tragedy, US authorities arrested van driver Steve Shand, who was driving two undocumented Indian passengers. US immigration authorities found and detained another group of five Indian nationals in the vicinity who also reportedly crossed over from Canada. All of them now face legal action in the US.

PATEL PIPELINE

The US has been a hot destination for Gujarati migrants, both legal and illegal, for decades. US census data from 2014 showed that Gujaratis, who are just 6 per cent of India's population, comprise 20 per cent of the people of Indian origin (PIOs) in the US. They have over the years gone on to run successful businesses, mostly motel chains and grocery stores. Around 40 per cent of the hospitality business in the US is run by Guja-

MILIND SHELTE

ratis. Their dominance in this industry, however, has opened the floodgates for illegal migration in recent years. “Legal migrants who went to the US before 2010 have turned to cheap labour—mostly distant relatives from their native villages,” says Ahmedabad businessman Dharmendra Patel, who too has kin in the US. With legal avenues for migration drying up in Donald Trump’s reign (2017-21), many Indians took to the illegal route.

The Gujarat police believes the migrants are sent to the US border through a wide network of agents in Ahmedabad and north Gujarat. These agents are plugged into a wider human smuggling and trafficking network in Mexico, Canada and the US. Wannabe migrants pay between Rs 50 lakh and Rs 1.1 crore per person to their human smugglers. Estimates prepared by the Gujarat police and NGOs show a near-tenfold rise in the number of human smuggling cases in the past four years, up to 900 in 2021-22. A March 2021 report by US-based think-tank New American Economy estimated that there were close to 500,000 undocumented Indian migrants in the country in 2020, with a collective spending power of $15.5 billion (Rs 1.2 lakh crore).

Stories of Patels staking everything and making it big in the US are legion in north Gujarat. The region, with six districts including Gandhinagar, is less developed than the Saurashtra and south Gujarat regions and accounts for the bulk of illegals. In September 2019, Jayesh Patel, 32, was arrested at Delhi airport trying to board a flight to New York disguised as a wheelchair-bound 81-year-old. The electrician from Ahmedabad was exposed by the black hair on his arms. He was travelling to the US at the behest of a female relative there.

Just how swiftly these dreams can become nightmares unfolded this February 13. The Gandhinagar police rescued 15 Gujaratis, all Patels, in Delhi. The group had been illegally confined there by traffickers. The Gandhinagar police have arrested a local agent, Rajesh Patel, while three alleged traffickers—Kolkata residents Sushil Roy and Santosh Roy, and Kamal Singhania from Delhi—are on the run. They forced the 15 people at gunpoint to inform family members that they had reached the US and then extorted Rs 3.5 crore, money that was to be paid after they reached the US.

A Gandhinagar police officer says one of the residents had paid Rs 1.6 crore to the agents to take his family to the US. Another had paid Rs 81 lakh for tickets and illegal transportation. Mitesh Patel, 39, one of the victims freed from the travel agents, had the Vasai police station in Mehsana district file an FIR. He said he was trying to enter the US illegally with wife Sheetal and their two young children because he could not get a passport (he was out on bail in a criminal case). “An acquaintance, Amrut Patel, told me about an agent who helped people shift to Canada without a passport. He got me in touch with agent Ramesh Patel. He met me with Sushil Roy who said he would send us to Canada without a passport for Rs 1.11 crore each,” Mitesh has been quoted as saying in the FIR. Mitesh and his family reached Kolkata via Mumbai on November 14, 2021. Singhania told him that their flight to Canada was booked for November 28, 2021. However, the traffickers took them to a hotel and locked them there. “They forcibly took my daughter and kept her in another room and demanded another Rs 25 lakh. They looted our jewellery and some US dollars. We paid them Rs 1.57 crore over two-and-a-half months,” says Mitesh.

GONE IN THE USA

Illegal immigration cases from India have exploded in the last 3 years

SUSPECTED CASES OF HUMAN SMUGGLING

139
2017-18

900
2021-22

COST INVOLVED PER PERSON

₹25 LAKH
2017-18

₹1 CRORE
2021-22

Source: Gujarat Police, community leaders

Police got leads in the case while investigating a secret tip-off that a couple, who had left Gandhinagar for Canada, was confined in a hotel in Delhi. The couple had managed to contact their relatives

Emerson
400 m
EXIT / SORTIE
POLICE
Historic Site

The home of the bereaved Patel family at Dinguncha village in Kalol taluka of Gandhinagar district after news came of the deaths; (below) Road signage in Emerson, Manitoba, in Canada where the bodies of the Patel family were found metres from the US border

JOHN WOODS/AP

in Gujarat who in turn approached Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel seeking help in tracing them. The agents had taken these 15 people first to Mumbai and then to Kolkata. They were held hostage and tortured there. The agents took them to Delhi only after they received money from their family members. "The victims are in a very bad state mentally, physically and financially," says Mayur Chavda, the superintendent of police, Gandhinagar.

THE EXODUS

Jagdish, Vaishaliben and their two children were cremated in Canada on February 6 in a funeral crowdfunded by relatives in North America. A fortnight after the tragedy, the joint family home in Dingucha is still in shock. In a courtyard lined with wheat sacks, a small knot of friends and relatives have come to meet Jagdish's father, Baldev Patel. Jagdish worked as a supervisor at a garment unit in Kalol, 20 km from his village, but when the nationwide Covid lockdown was imposed in March 2020 ,he returned to farm wheat and castor oil seeds on the family's 15-acre farm. Maternal uncle Rajnikant Patel insists the story of his nephew and his family going to the US for work is false. "There was no dearth of money," he says. Yet what else would prompt a well-off family with an average annual income of Rs 15 lakh to pick their bags and travel to the US illegally?

Life for illegal immigrants is a nightmare in the US. They do not have the social security number which entitles US citizens to a job and other state benefits. Harold D'Souza, whose NGO Eyes Open International based in Cincinnati, Ohio, raises awareness on human trafficking, says victims are lured by false success stories. "Immigrants are misguided by agents about US citizenship and work culture," says D'Souza, a Vadodara native. "The employers promise them legal help in acquiring a green card, which rarely happens. The illegals can neither go back nor fight with their employers." While there is no data available on which Indian state sends out the most illegal immigrants, NGOs working in the field say Punjab heads the list with Gujarat next.

D'Souza estimates that illegal migration is a $150 billion industry in the US. Prosecutions happen in less than 10 per cent of cases. "No one likes to touch the agents as huge money is involved. I know several cases where illegal migrants were pushed into the flesh trade," he says. The influential Gujarati diaspora is also worried. "They (illegal immigrants) should remember that they will not be treated with honour if they come to the US illegally. No one should take the illegal route," says C.K. Patel, president of the California-based Vishwa Gujarati Samaj.

Activists like D'Souza believe travel agents are the masterminds and that the menace has to be halted at its source. Police could move in on the traffickers in Delhi only because the crimes committed came under the sections for extortion and cheating. Anil Pratham, DGP (women's security and crime), Gujarat Police, blames the US authorities. "We sent letters to authorities in the US and Canada seeking details of the Dingucha case. They did not respond," he says. "We can't do much if they are not complaining."

Yet there is evidence that gullible citizens continue to be targets. On February 5, Kalol resident Vishnu Patel filed a complaint with the police accusing Ahmedabad-based travel agent Rutvik Parekh of cheating. Patel had agreed to pay Rs 1.1 crore to Parekh to send nephew Vishal and his wife Rupani to the US via the Delhi-Mexico route (see *Dodgy Trails*). Patel alleges the agent started demanding the Rs 50 lakh advance even before the couple left India and that unknown persons shot at him at Parekh's behest.

With state elections due in December, politics has begun entering the picture. The Patels are politically very significant. They directly impact 45 of the state's 181 assembly seats and have influence in 35 others. Nitin Patel, a senior BJP leader and former deputy chief minister, said on January 21 in Mehsana that community members were leaving for the US because of a lack of employment opportunities in the state. A senior state government official rejects this allegation: "Our government has provided 200,000 government jobs in the past five years. We have a 10-year jobs plan ready. It is not true that there is a lack of opportunities."

What is true is that Patels feel left out and have been demanding reservations in government jobs since 2015. Last September, to appease the community, the BJP replaced CM Vijay Rupani, a Jain, with a first-time MLA, Bhupendra Patel. A Patel-centric human smuggling racket and the narrative of a job shortage in the state fuelling an exodus is a challenge for the new CM. With just 10 months left to go for polls, partymen hope he will crack down on such networks. Otherwise, the state's human pipeline will continue to gush migrants into the desolate frontiers of north America. ■

BJP

CM contenders:
N. Biren Singh, 61; Govindas Konthoujam Singh, 58; Thongam Biswajit Singh, 47
***Alliance partner:* Naga People's Front (NPF), but both are contesting separately**

STRENGTHS

- Peace in Manipur in the past five years
- CM Biren Singh's outreach programme to bridge the gap between hills and valley
- Organisational and financial strength of the party

CHALLENGES

- Public discontent over poor infrastructure, unemployment.
- Disgruntled ticket-seekers may sabotage chances of BJP candidates
- Infighting over CM's post

EAR TO THE GROUND
N. Biren Singh (centre) campaigns in Saikul constituency, Feb. 10

Photographs by CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

ASSEMBLY POLLS 2022

MANIPUR

TREADING THE FAULT LINES

Ethnic divide, insurgent threats, AFSPA, unemployment, difficult allies—the ruling BJP and rival Congress face multiple issues and new challenger NPP in elections to this border state

BY KAUSHIK DEKA

On a sunny February morning, occasionally swept by a cold breeze, Manipur chief minister N. Biren Singh's convoy left for Saikul assembly constituency in Kangpokpi district, 35 km from state capital Imphal. The cavalcade moved slowly, taking nearly two hours to reach Saikul, a Kuki-dominated area where Singh was to campaign for BJP candidate Yamthong Haokip, a Congress import from last November. Despite the unpaved, potholed stretches along the way, Singh's address to the 700-strong gathering in Saikul did not promise new roads. Instead, he warned militants not to disturb peace which, he claims, has prevailed in Manipur since the BJP came to power in 2017. "If PM Modi can strike terror camps in Balakot, the same can be done against other outfits involved in terrorism," thundered the chief minister.

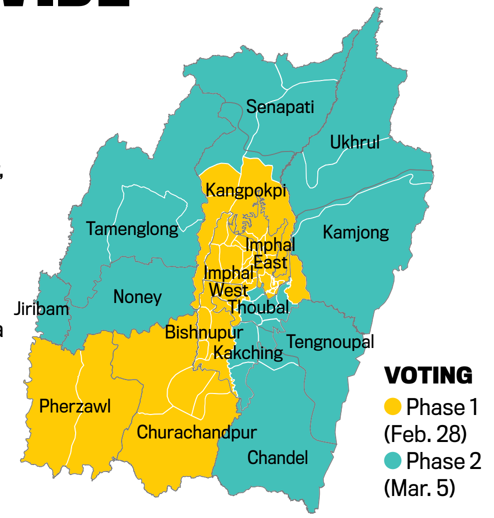
The warning to insurgents has a context. David Hangshing, chairman of the militant group Kuki Revolutionary Army, has forced five BJP members of the Autonomous District Council of Kangpokpi to resign from the party and support his wife Kimneo Hangshing, who is contesting as an Independent from Saikul. Interference by insurgent groups, including threats issued to candidates, is common in Manipur. Civil rights activists also allege a nexus between politicians and insurgents, particularly during elections. Ironically, Hangshing and Haokip were arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in 2018 in a case of weapons missing from the armoury of the 2nd Battalion Manipur Rifles.

A WEB OF COMPLEXITIES

Manipur votes in two phases, on February 28 and March 5. Ethnic undercurrents, the hills-plains divide, influence of militant outfits and money power are known to cast a shadow on elections in the state. Party affiliation rarely matters. The incumbent BJP-led government had two major allies—the National People's Party (NPP) and the Naga People's Front (NPF). While the NPP is contesting the poll on its own, the NPF remains a BJP ally. Yet, in the 15 constituencies that the NPF is contesting, the BJP has also fielded candidates. Last November, the BJP inducted 12 NPF members, in continuation of its policy of poaching "winnable" candidates from other parties.

VALLEY VS. HILLS: THE BIG DIVIDE

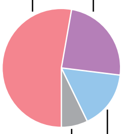
Of the 60 assembly constituencies in Manipur, 40 are in the valley areas spread over six districts–Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Kakching and Kangpokpi. The remaining 20 seats are in the other 10 districts. The **valley districts, dominated by Meiteis,** account for just over 11 per cent of the geographical area but are home to 57 per cent of the population. The remaining 43 per cent live in the **hill districts, dominated by the Naga and Kuki tribes.**



ETHNIC & GEOGRAPHICAL DIVIDE

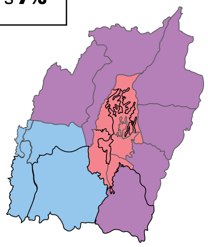
MEITEI
53%
Mostly follow Hinduism and Sanamahism. In majority in Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Kakching and Kangpokpi

NAGA
24%
Mostly Christian. In majority in Ukhrul, Kamjong, Tengnoupal, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel



Others **7%**

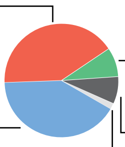
KUKI
16%
Mostly Christian. In majority in Churachandpur, Jiribam, Noney and Pherzawl



RELIGIOUS DIVIDE

Hindu
41%

Christian
41%

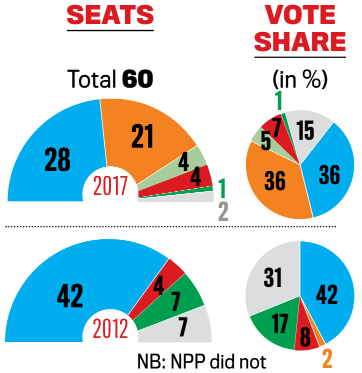


Others **1.8%**

Muslim
8.4%

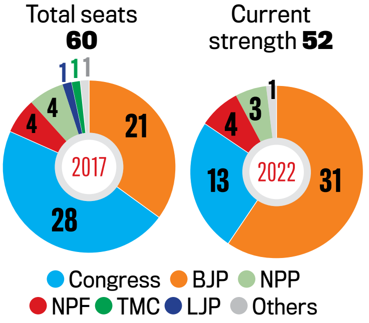
Sanamahism
7.8%

HOW MANIPUR VOTED IN THE PAST



NB: NPP did not participate

HOW THE MANIPUR ASSEMBLY CHANGED



Graphic by ASIT ROY *Source: Census, Election Commission*

NATIONAL PEOPLE'S PARTY (NPP)

CM contender: **Yumnam Joykumar Singh, 67**
Alliance partner: **None**

STRENGTHS

- Selection of strong candidates
- Campaign for repeal of AFSPA has a connect with voters
- Social media campaign is attracting young voters

CHALLENGES

- Contesting only 40 of 60 seats
- Y. Joykumar Singh's record as DGP may go against the party
- Organisationally not as strong as BJP and Congress

Around a dozen of the BJP candidates this time were with the Congress in the previous election. Several leaders who were denied tickets by the BJP and the Congress have joined the NPP and Janata Dal (United). Representing a party may have its advantages, but victory is often determined by the candidates' equation with the electorate. As Congress-turned-BJP leader Rajkumar Imo Singh tells voters in Sagolband: "The car's brand doesn't matter. If the driver remains the same, then the quality of driving will be the same."

The BJP, one may argue, is in favour going by the rush of ticket-seekers, but those annoyed over being denied a ticket may mar the party's chances. Victory margins in Manipur are usually narrow, with 32,000 being the average electorate size of an assembly seat. "Ultimately, the potential of candidates, irrespective of their party affiliation, will determine the poll results," says Prof. Rajen Singh Laishram, head of the political science department at Manipur University.

Of the 60 assembly seats, with a total electorate of 1.9 million, 40 are in the valley areas spanning six districts—Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Kakching and Kangpokpi. The other 20 seats are spread over the remaining 10 districts. The valley districts, dominated by the Meitei community, account for just over 11 per cent of the geographical area but 57 per cent of the state's 2.8 million people (Census 2011). The remaining population lives in the hill districts, dominated by the Naga and Kuki tribes. Ethnic tension between the Meiteis and the Nagas/Kukis also dictates politics in the state. Discontent in every region has given rise to insurgent groups based on ethnicity.

But Biren Singh, a Meitei, claims these divisions are a thing of the past. He is the first state chief minister in 15 years to have got a red carpet welcome from Nagas in Ukhrul. The district has not only given Manipur two Naga CMs—Yangmaso Shazia and Rishang Keishing—but is home to Thuingaleng Muivah, general secretary of the NSCN(IM) insurgent group. Visits to Ukhrul by former chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh during the previous Congress regime had seen boycotts, shutdowns and violence.

In contrast, Biren Singh, a former protégé of Ibobi Singh, has addressed crowds in Ukhrul without bullet-proof cover. The BJP credits this changed equation between the state government and the Nagas to the CM's 'Go to Hills' outreach aimed at delivering government welfare to people's doorsteps in the tribal-dominated hills. There were other initiatives too, such as interaction with civil society groups, sensitising the police to be people friendly and opening channels with the militant groups.

BIREN SINGH'S REPORT CARD

The NPF, which is restricted to the Naga-dominated hill areas and won four seats in 2017, is not impressed by the BJP's claims. "The Biren Singh government's acceptability is due to the NPF being a constituent. Our party ensured that the government was sensitive to the concerns of Nagas," says Ram Muivah, the NPF candidate from Ukhrul, where the party came third in 2017. The former IAS officer says Ukhrul still "looks like a slum", with poor roads, drainage and other infrastructure. For the record, it takes three hours to cover the 80 km distance by road between Imphal and Ukhrul. For all-round development of

the hill districts, the NPF wants effective implementation of Article 371(C) of the Constitution (which pertains to the special provision for Manipur), including a separate budget and directorate for the region. Both the BJP and NPF claim their tally will go up in the hills—from five and four respectively last time.

Biren Singh concedes "there's lots to do" in terms of developing the hills and the valley. "We started out well, but the pandemic constrained us financially and affected development projects," reasons Singh. He lists out his achievements—highways connecting Imphal to border towns, Ima markets (run exclusively by women), tap water supply to 64 per cent of the population (it was 5.7 per cent in 2017), model schools in all districts and free health insurance for the entire population. "Our health insurance scheme was launched even before the Centre's Ayushman Bharat (2018). Enrolment in government schools has jumped by 230 per cent in the past five years," claims Biren Singh.

Unemployment, though, is a major issue in Manipur. At over 9 per cent, it's the second highest in the northeast. With few industries, most youngsters in this poor state, which accounts for 0.16 per cent of India's GDP and has a per capita income half the national average, depend on government jobs. However, government hiring stopped when the pandemic broke out. Several examinations for government positions were conducted but results withheld. "If we return to power, all results will be immediately declared," says Biren Singh.

HIGH SPIRITS NPP leader Yumnam Joykumar Singh and daughter Ratika Yumnam (left); NPF candidate Ram Muivah campaigns in Ukhrul

The CM claims the government's support has helped launch 5,400 start-ups and 11,000 MSME units in Manipur—primarily in agriculture, horticulture, handloom and handicrafts—and created about 100,000 jobs. Manipur has the highest number of handicraft units in the northeast. Handloom is the largest cottage industry and the state ranks among the top five in the country in terms of the number of looms. It also accounts for 14 per cent of India's bamboo production.

CONGRESS EYES A COMEBACK

The Congress accuses the BJP government of making false promises. The party says the Modi government's Act East policy has failed to boost cross-border trade in the northeast. Manipur is considered India's gateway to the east through Moreh, which is the only feasible land route for trade between India, Myanmar and South Asia. "Except propaganda and lies, the central government has done nothing. Union ministers visited Manipur but no development package was announced," says the Congress's Ibobi Singh, who was chief minister from 2002 to 2017.

> **BOTH THE BJP AND CONGRESS, FEARING MORE INFIGHTING, HAVE REFRAINED FROM OFFICIALLY DECLARING THEIR CHIEF MINISTERIAL CANDIDATES**

The Congress manifesto promises 50,000 jobs every year, 33 per cent reservation for women in government jobs, increase in rice production, control on price rise, and creating a 'mountain economy' for integrated development of land and people in the hills. The 73-year-old Ibobi Singh is once again leading the Congress's campaign to regain its electoral space in Manipur. The single largest party in 2017 with 28 seats, the Congress has lost 15 MLAs in the past five years, including state unit president Govindas Konthoujam Singh, to poaching by the BJP. Congress insiders allege that the large-scale defections happened because of Ibobi Singh's excessive grip on the party organisation and reluctance to let other leaders grow. Biren Singh too had left the Congress in 2016, following a tiff with Ibobi.

The heaviest damage to the Congress was perhaps inflicted by Imo Singh, son of former CM Rajkumar Jaichandra Singh and son-in-law of Biren Singh. Ignored by Ibobi in party affairs, Imo allegedly facilitated the defection of Congress MLAs to the BJP—most recently of Haokip. During a no-confidence motion in 2020, he saved the Biren Singh government by getting six Congress MLAs to resign and two to abstain. Imo Singh eventually joined the BJP in November last year.

Several Congress leaders are wary of Ibobi Singh's 'anti-Naga' image. In 2010, his government did not allow T. Muivah to visit his home in Ukhrul. In spite of that, the Congress won nine of the 20 hill seats, including Ukhrul, in 2017—the highest among all parties. It only showed that candidates' victory or defeat in elections in Manipur was not determined much by their party.

Bhakta Charan Das, the AICC (All India Congress Committee) in-charge for Manipur, claims defections have helped his party. "We are united and have the opportunity to field good candidates who are committed to the party ideology and people's welfare," says Das. Congress state chief N. Loken Singh is confident that the party will form the government on its own. Despite the display of unity, the Congress has shied away from declaring a chief ministerial candidate. Das, though, says Ibobi Singh should be the natural choice.

The BJP has its own worries over who will be chief minister should the party return to power. If it fails to get a majority on its own, the party will look to Imo Singh for help, as he still has friends in the Congress. The BJP may also have to depend on Govindas Singh, who also has extensive links in the Congress. But he may demand the CM's chair in return. The BJP has other aspirants too, such as Thongam Biswajit Singh.

Union minister Bhupender Yadav recently announced in Imphal that the BJP parliamentary board will take the final call on the chief minister should the party get a majority. His statement has led to speculation that the BJP

OLD WARHORSE Congress leader Okram Ibobi Singh in Delhi

ANI

CONGRESS

CM contender
Okram Ibobi Singh, 73

Alliance partners: **Five Left parties though there are some friendly contests**

STRENGTHS

- **Acceptance among both Hindu and Christian voters**
- **NPP's emergence may cut into BJP votes**
- **Anti-incumbency against BJP due to lack of jobs and poor infrastructure**

CHALLENGES

- **Deep factionalism within the party**
- **Several winnable candidates defected to BJP**
- **Unable to match BJP's financial might**

central leadership may adopt the Assam model in Manipur. In the Assam polls last year, the party did not name any chief ministerial candidate. After victory, incumbent Sarbananda Sonowal was replaced by Himanta Biswa Sarma, an import from the Congress who made no secret of his chief ministerial ambitions. The BJP's slogan in Manipur is to cross the 40-seat mark (from 21 in 2017). If Biren Singh's chief ministership can earn the party a majority, it will be very difficult to dethrone him.

WHO WILL PLAY KINGMAKER?

Biren Singh faces resistance from the NPP—whose party leader and deputy chief minister Yumnam Joykumar Singh has been a vocal critic of the CM. "NPP members were appointed ministers but not allowed to function," alleges Joykumar Singh. In 2020, Biren Singh's government had almost collapsed when four NPP MLAs withdrew support. Long negotiations and the BJP central leadership's intervention helped end the crisis, with the four NPP leaders returning to the fold.

Should the BJP need the NPP's support to attain a majority, the Shillong-headquartered party may demand Biren's replacement. Observers do not rule out the NPP even claiming the CM's post. "We have grown in size and acceptance among the people over the past five years. We are confident of emerging as the single largest party," says Joykumar Singh, even though his party is contesting only 40 seats. NPP national president and Meghalaya chief minister Conrad Sangma offers a more reasonable assessment—a double digit tally for the NPP, as against four in 2017.

Independent observers concur that the NPP will certainly emerge bigger in the election, at the cost of both the BJP and Congress. "The NPP has selected better candidates than other parties. In Manipur, the track record of the candidate plays a bigger role than of the party," says Laishram of Manipur University. The NPP claims it is finding traction among young voters through a carefully crafted digital campaign monitored by Joykumar Singh's daughter Ratika Yumnam, an Oxford graduate. As head of the NPP youth wing, she is seen as the new-age face of the party. "People are connecting with us because of our northeast ideology. While we represent the unique local culture and local issues, the BJP lacks touch with the grassroots," says Ratika.

A formidable electoral plank for the NPP is the demand for the repeal of the contentious Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, or AFSPA. Between 2012 and 2016, 186 cases of human rights violations by security forces were recorded in states where AFSPA is in force. Manipur accounted for 11 per cent of the cases. In 2016, the Supreme Court, while hearing a case on extra-judicial killings in Manipur, asserted that AFSPA did not guarantee blanket impunity to the armed forces. Ironically, there have been allegations of fake encounters against Joykumar Singh, who was Manipur DGP between 2007 and 2012. He refutes the charges.

The repeal of AFSPA finds place in the Congress manifesto as well. Cornered, Biren Singh claims he is committed to repealing the draconian act. But for that to happen, his government wants to create a conducive environment first. The killing of an army colonel and his family in an ambush by militants in the state's Churachandpur district in November last year—the first such strike since 2015—had provided the BJP government an argument in favour of continuing with AFSPA.

One achievement the BJP can flaunt is the introduction of Inner Line Permit (ILP) in Manipur 2019. This was a longstanding demand in the state. Several northeastern states, such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram, also require non-resident citizens to obtain limited-duration ILP permits for travel within the state. The system was introduced to protect ethnic identity and culture. But beyond these identity issues, the people of Manipur want development, jobs and lasting peace. Given the heavy dependence on central grants, the state has often voted for the party in power in Delhi. In that sense, the BJP may hold an edge, but elections in this border state have never been linear or predictable. It may be no different this time. ■

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CATTLE BATTLE

Will the BJP's bovine obsession dent its electoral fortunes in the cow belt state?

BY PRASHANT SRIVASTAVA

They are everywhere—on the streets, blocking traffic, and in the fields, wreaking havoc on men and crops. Stray cattle, or *awara pashu*, as they are called in local parlance, have become enough of an issue in the cow belt state of Uttar Pradesh to influence—if not decide—the electoral outcome in many seats.

"I am so angry," says Rajwati, a resident of Gulab Kheda village in the state's Unnao district, which goes to polls on February 23. "I will not vote for any party because none of them is raising this serious issue. Our men have to be on guard in the fields at night because of the stray cattle. Due to this, my husband is unable to give enough time to his family."

Another farmer from Amroha, Lal Kumar Singh, bemoans: "Stray cattle roam freely in our area and destroy our wheat, pulse and mustard crop. Last year, when people from the Adampur, Beejhalpur, Sheetal Daray and Putsal villages locked abandoned cows in the premises of a school after they destroyed their crop, the police booked them for cruelty to animals."

Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath has never made any secret of his bovine priorities. Shortly after taking over, he announced a ban on cow smuggling and ordered a crack-down on illegal slaughterhouses. The subsequent cow vigilantism resulted in

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

AWARA MOOS Stray cows on the Kanpur-Jhansi Highway

ON THE GAU...

19 million
Number of cows in UP

1.18 million
Stray cattle in UP

5,617
Cow protection centres in UP

789,000
No. of cows in *gaushalas*

140,000
Cows distributed under various government schemes

150
No. of illegal slaughterhouses that have been shut down in the past five years

an increase in bovine-related violence, including lynching. The number of cow protection centres in the state has gone up to 5,617 from 586 such centres for destitute cows in urban centres. The government has also set up 3,458 *bhoosa* or fodder banks across districts and arranged 887,000 quintal of fodder for cattle it prefers to call *nirashrit* (without shelter) rather than *awara*. The state has also come up with an adopt-a-cow scheme. Under the Nirashrit Besahara Govansh Sahbhagita Yojana, people are given an incentive of Rs 30 a day per cow for taking care of up to four cows. Some 120,000 animals have been given out to 54,000 people under the scheme, claims Sudhir Garg, principal secretary in the animal husbandry department of the state. In January 2019, the state imposed a cow cess of half a per cent on excise items like alcohol and a one per cent levy on *mandi parishads* or marketing committees.

And yet the problem persists.

So much so that farmers have been clamouring for political parties to include it in their election manifestos if they wanted their votes. Opposition parties were quick to jump onto the bandwagon. In December, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav promised a compensation of Rs 5 lakh to the families of those whose kin have been killed in bovine attacks if his party came to power. He also brought up the subject at his rallies before this announcement.

SP spokesperson Manoj Kaka is convinced it is a significant poll issue. “Earlier, people used to treat cattle as ‘*pashudhan*’ (animal wealth) because milk sales earned them an income and they were useful in the fields. Now they call them *awara pashu* because their numbers have gone up so much they are out of control.” According to Garg, UP currently has a total cow population of 19 million. Of these, 1.1 million can be characterised as cows without owners.

“Even *pashu melas* have been stopped in this regime where farmers could sell cattle,” adds SP’s Kaka. “*Gaushalas* (cow shelters) and *sanrankshan kendras* (protection centres), on the other hand, have become exemplars of mismanagement. As a result, you find cows roaming the highways and markets causing accidents, or in the fields, where they are ruining crops.”

On October 16, 2021, 11 people, including seven women and four children, mostly from the same family, died and another half a dozen were injured in Chirgaon near Jhansi when a tractor trolley overturned while trying to save stray cattle. The incident caused enough of a furore for CM Adityanath to instruct his officials to ensure proper treatment for the injured. On November 22 the same year, he also asked all district magistrates to ensure all destitute cattle was kept in cow shelters and did not roam the streets.

UP Congress chief Ajay Lallu says he found people talking about the issue wherever he went. “Hundreds of people have been killed in the state in bovine attacks, but the government has no figures. A farmer’s life has no value for them. If we form the government, we will give compensation of Rs 3,000 per acre to farmers who have lost their crop to stray cattle.”

Bahujan Samaj Party state spokesperson Dr M.H. Khan, on the other hand, thinks the ruling regime has done cows a great disservice. “They claim to be *gau rakshaks*,” he says, “but they are responsible for the pitiable condition of cows in the state.” He believes cows, both in *gaushalas* as well as on the streets, are victims of neglect. He also thinks that a lot of fake cases of cow slaughter are being registered against people. “If we form the government, we will fight for justice for those who have been wrongly accused.”

In the past five years, 150 illegal slaughterhouses have been shut down. Currently, only 35 slaughterhouses, perceived to be adhering to prescribed norms, are operating in UP. The state government also claims it had identified 356 cattle mafia groups and initiated action against 1,823 accused. It has also confiscated assets worth Rs 18 crore from 68 smugglers booked under the UP Gangsters and Anti-social Activities (Prevention) Act.

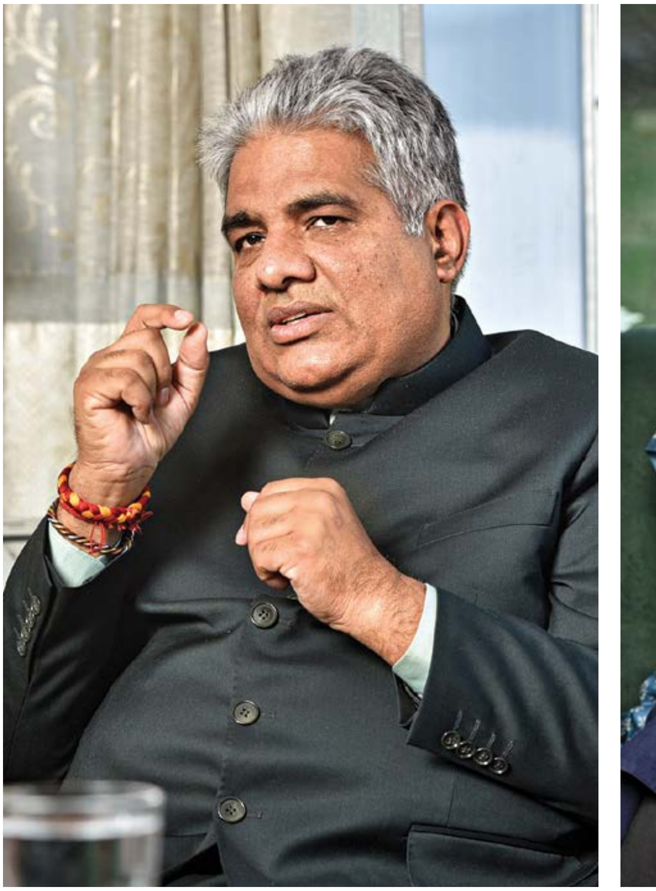
UP BJP spokesperson Rakesh Tripathi denies that stray cattle is an issue in these polls. While acknowledging that the shutdown of illegal slaughterhouses and the ban on cow smuggling had contributed to the rising number of stray cows, he said the government’s initiatives such as the cow adoption and Poshan mission schemes will go a long way in resolving the issue. Then, tapping into Hindutva sentiment, he dangles the threat that slaughter of the holy animal will begin again as SP men are not exactly cow lovers. “In 2019 too, they tried to make it a poll issue,” says Tripathi, “but failed. This time, too, they will not be able to make political capital out of the issue. Our government’s schemes will ensure cows are well looked after.”

He is referring to the government’s Poshan Mission under which families with undernourished children are provided cows so that they can get milk. According to government figures, 1,883 families have availed of this benefit till date and 1,894 destitute cows have found a home. Close to 789,000 cows are housed in *gaushalas*, he claims.

But is it enough to assuage the suffering of UP’s farmers? That remains a moo point. ■

‘HINDUTVA IS NOT RIGID. IT BELIEVES IN UNITY, NOT UNIFORMITY’

– BHUPENDER YADAV



Before **Bhupender Yadav** became the Union minister of environment, forests, climate change, and of labour, he was a key general secretary in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In that role, he played a significant role in building the party into a formidable electoral machine that won two consecutive Lok Sabha elections. Now, along with economist **Ila Patnaik**, he has penned *The Rise of the BJP*, a book that offers a clinical analysis of the party’s evolution, its ideological moorings, its economic philosophy, and the lessons its phenomenal growth can teach us. In a conversation with Group Editorial Director **Raj Chengappa**, Yadav and Patnaik discuss what their new book is about. Excerpts from the interview

Q. For decades, the BJP’s vote percentage hovered below 25 per cent. It crossed the 30 per cent mark in 2014, and in 2019 reached 37.7 per cent. To what do you attribute this quantum leap?

Bhupender Yadav: Firstly, if you analyse the BJP after the formation of the Vajpayee government in 1998, you will find that in 1998 as well as in 2014 and 2019, the BJP won maximum seats in the tribal areas. Secondly, there was a strategic change in the way the party was organised from just a core entity to several fronts and cells and then connecting with the voters at the booth level. Thirdly, Advaniji’s yatras helped the BJP reach rural areas where earlier the party had no presence. The fourth reason behind the sudden surge in the BJP’s vote percentage after 2014 was its unique digital campaign. So, if the yatras took the BJP to areas that were remote, the digital campaign helped it connect with the middle class through their phones. Most importantly, the party followed it up with mass contact programmes tailored to different regions. It also organised training programmes. That brought about a massive transformation. After winning the 2014 election, the implementation of massive welfare schemes that touched everyone led to the Modi government’s re-election in 2019.

Q. For the BJP and their mentors, the RSS, the main agenda for decades was seen to be building the Ram temple, abolition of Article 370, implementation of the Uniform Civil Code and focusing on cultural nationalism. But these do not figure as the primary drivers in your book.

Yadav: I have analysed the resolutions passed on these issues since 1950, including the one on Ram

Photographs by RAJWANT RAWAT

"While the Vajpayee regime believed in encouraging growth through building infrastructure, for the Modi government, redistribution of wealth is as important"

– ILA PATNAIK

Janmabhoomi. But no party can remain in power continuously on one emotive issue. Yes, we do believe in cultural nationalism, but apart from this, political consistency, dedication, strategy, organisation-strengthening, capacity-building and social equations too are important to the party. Hence, while tracking the journey of the BJP, besides the importance of its leaders, I have laid equal emphasis on other things like how the party organisation is structured and the people's involvement. It is the cumulative effect of everything.

Q. The book doesn't delve in depth into the Hindutva narrative. Is it deliberate?

Yadav: When we say '*Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah*' (may all be happy), it is not just a philosophical thing for us. It means ensuring the welfare of all, especially the poor. Secondly, the faith may be individual, but philosophies can be different. Even within Hindutva, there are several philosophical schools like Nyaya, Vaisheshik, Yoga or Sankhya. There is no singularity of thought; even atheists like Charvaka find a place. Philosophically, our uniqueness lies in accepting different things, but our focus remains cultural identity. We are part of an ancient national culture. So, a larger definition of Hindutva is its acceptability, taking it as a way of life, believing it to be environment-friendly, assigning it a scientific attitude, and that it changes with the times while retaining its core identity and values... Hindutva is not a rigid thing. There is a difference between unity and uniformity. Hindutva is for unity, not for uniformity.

Q. Except when it comes to a Uniform Civil Code...

Yadav: Even in the civil code, within a single Hindu society, there are different rituals. So, should everyone follow the same traditions in marriage? No! This cannot happen. But, Article 14 of the Constitution, which is about the right to equality, must be applied equally. Overall, there must be consensus on the issue related to human dignity.

Q. Was there a change in economic direction when Narendra Modi assumed power compared to the Vajpayee era?

Ila Patnaik: One needs to see what the objective of the BJP in economics and governance was. One objective was to raise the standard of living of the people irrespective of caste, community, region or class. For that, the party believes you need both growth and redistribution of wealth. The Vajpayee government's policies focused on creating the infrastructure that could raise it. So, for example, rural roads—under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana—was one of the first very successful cases of infrastructure building. As also telecom reforms, including privatisation, which was basically spurring growth by reducing the misallocation of resources. Now, when you come to Modi 1.0, the emphasis is on redistribution apart from infrastructure—better governance, better and targeted delivery. Banking the unbanked through Jan Dhan is a good example. Also, plugging the leakage in welfare schemes and cleansing the system. This was done by eliminating intermediaries through direct benefit transfer mechanisms.

Q. How would you describe the BJP's economic philosophy?

Patnaik: To get economic growth in the system, the approach was to have a market-based economy but with the government being a regulator and infrastructure-builder, which would create the conditions and the environment for people to add value by producing and organising themselves efficiently to contribute to the economy. They are not saying everything will be done by the State, like in the '60s and '70s, whether it is hotels or watches or airlines. They believe the private sector can manage these more efficiently. What they want the State to do is to bring regulation like an efficient tax system as with GST in which the government tried to make India one market and get rid of all the octrois and different taxes. Or the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code that broke the nexus between banks and industrialists that had bred corruption.

Q. The Modi government came to power promising minimum government, but when accused of being a '*suit-boot sarkar*' veered towards becoming a messiah of the poor?

Yadav: I believe that the biggest tragedy of the BJP is that it has been painted as a party of urban upper caste people—of business tycoons and the rich. That we are a communal party. We are not like that. You may see that our party ideologue, Deen Dayalji, mooted the Antyodaya (welfare of the poorest) philosophy in 1967. And the Bhairon Singhji-led government in Rajasthan became the first to experiment with the philosophy. The secret of Modiji's successful rule in Gujarat was the implementation of policies right down to the most deprived tribal areas. I feel the first objective of the book is to rescue the BJP from the narrative that classifies working for the people or the welfare of the poor as left, right, capitalist etc. Secondly, while the left talks of class conflict, we focus on class coordination. So, on the one hand, we implemented welfare schemes for the poor, and on the other also implemented reforms for states. Now, we are seeing the results of those steps.

Q. The BJP is also accused of hypernationalism and polarisation?
Yadav: I don't believe there is any intolerance anywhere. Because there have been so many welfare schemes. In five years, I have never seen any newsitem that said Ujjwala benefits were denied to someone because they belonged to a particular religion or that any village was denied power supply because it was inhabited by people of a certain religion or caste. When we did not discriminate against anyone in our policies, why should there be any talk of favouritism or polarisation?

> **"I want to rescue the BJP from the narrative that sees working for the poor as left, right or capitalist. While the left believes in class conflict, we focus on class coordination"**
>
> **– BHUPENDER YADAV**

Q. Finally, what are the big lessons for the BJP in your book?
Yadav: One, that to stay in the driver's seat for a long time, national ambitions have to be balanced with regional aspirations. Two, leadership capacities should be developed at all levels because a block level leader is as important as an MP or MLA. Then, upholding the core principles of BJP's organisational strategy: eschewing dynastic succession, promoting internal democracy and taking collective decisions. Finally, monitoring the personal and collective moral principles of those who have been in power for long. ■

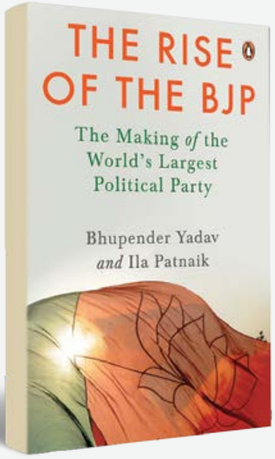
REVIEW

THE NEW POLITICAL MACHINE

Two books charting the BJP's journey to the top highlight how the saffron party has reshaped itself into a formidable political machine

BY RAHUL VERMA

The ascendance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to the national centrestage in 2014 has provoked some serious scholarly attention in the past few years. Several books have been published presenting both sympathetic and deeply critical accounts of the party and its 'ideological mentor', the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), as well as biographical descriptions of several top leaders of both organisations. There are also new monographs focusing on how the rise of the BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is reshaping India's political culture and its democracy.



▲ THE RISE OF THE BJP
The Making of the World's Largest Political Party
By Bhupender Yadav & Ila Patnaik
PENGUIN
₹699; 336 pages

It is in this context that the two books under review—one co-authored by senior BJP leader Bhupender Yadav and economist Ila Patnaik, *The Rise of the BJP: The Making of the World's Largest Political Party*; and journalist and academic Nalin Mehta's *The New BJP: Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party*—provide valuable insights into the inner workings of the party. However, both books shy away from taking a normative position on what the rise of the BJP means for Indian politics, or from making an attempt to build a more general theory of how political parties expand their presence.

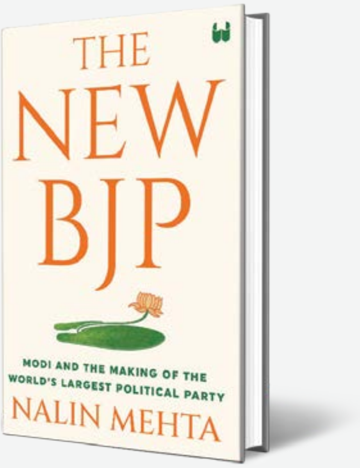
Yadav and Patnaik provide an account of the BJP's history from the Jan Sangh days to the 2019 campaign. This 300-page book is divided into 12 chapters and provides a linear history of the party's transformation over 70 years. It grapples with the difficulties posed by the sudden demise of the Jan Sangh's first president Syama Prasad Mookerjee to the dilemmas the party faced after walking out of the Janata Party. Further chapters deal with the party's expanding base in the aftermath of the *mandir* mobilisation, its first tryst with power at the national level, and the party's unexpected defeat in 2004. Chapters seven through nine discuss the period between 2004 and 2014, and the final chapters focus on the party's geographical and social expansion since then and the 2019 campaign.

The book is replete with telling anecdotes. One describes how a day before the 2004 election results, Pramod Mahajan tried to make a case before the then PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee that the BJP was likely to win more seats than in 1999. Vajpayee smiled and said, pack your bags and get ready to sit in the Opposition. Only party insiders could be privy to such information and it is a welcome initiative that an active politician is writing about the party's journey. Similarly, the analysis of the economic policies of the Vajpayee and Modi governments brings Patnaik's voice to the fore. The book also lists ways in which the BJP remains in action on the ground and mobilises its constituencies through *yatras*, *divases* and *samvaads*.

While it was expected that a practitioner's perspective will be sympathetic, this is a lost opportunity to record more details of how the BJP functions. One hoped for a more analytical insight on the loss of 2004, the churn within the party in its aftermath, and on its changing relationship with the RSS over the past 20 years. Similarly, the discussion on ideology focuses on what is socially desirable rather than analysing how the BJP differentiates itself from other parties.

Mehta, on the other hand, submerges himself into microscopic details in search for explanations for the scale of the BJP's victories, particularly since Modi's rise to power. His account of the BJP focuses on the past decade and seamlessly blends a variety of methodological techniques.

The thematic organisation of the book answers the question that Mehta poses in five parts. In part one, the focus is on the accommodation of backward castes through the nomination of candidates and appointments in the party organisation as well as the cabinet, and reaching out to poor and interior areas through welfare and infrastructure. Part two analyses the party's use of digital technology in comparison to the Congress, how its communication strategy and organisational restructuring have helped it to become a gigantic election machine. Part three discusses the evolution of the party's economic thinking from the Jan Sangh days to Modi's model of welfarism. Part four focuses on the umbilical cord between the RSS and the BJP. It also marshals data to show the increasing footprint of the RSS in various parts of the country. Part five relies on case studies to document the BJP's geographical expansion in India's southern and eastern states and the strategies that have driven it.



▲ **THE NEW BJP**
Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party
By Nalin Mehta
WESTLAND
₹751; 840 pages

Mehta and his collaborators have assembled a variety of new data for this volume—for example, an original digital database of 11,588 BJP-linked documents between 2006 and 2019. This offline literature was then compared with the social media posts by the top BJP leadership using data-mining software NARAD (Normative Analysis of Reporting and Discourse), developed specifically for this project, to show how communication patterns change over time.

While I may have some quibbles over the interpretation of a few data points, the rich set of new materials Mehta has collected is truly impressive. The book, however, falls short of expectations in presenting a theoretically more robust explanation and engaging narrative of the BJP's rise given the wealth of information at the author's disposal. Nor does he make an attempt to grapple with why the BJP still finds it difficult to strengthen its position in states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala despite the resources at its command.

The party's massive victory in the 2019 election confirmed the rise of the second dominant party system with the BJP as the system-defining party. While the party continues to face electoral challenges in the states and pushback by civil society groups on various issues, it has moved swiftly, creating one wedge after the other. And this has kept the parliamentary opposition in a state of suspended animation. Along with this a great game has begun to dislodge the Congress as the main opposition with the Trinamool Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party jostling for the second spot, increasing the electoral distance between the BJP and the rest in a fragmented political space. These developments, along with the machinery that the BJP has created in the past decade (described in these two books) gives the party a far-reaching advantage over its competitors. Can this machine withstand the increasing concerns over the economy, religious tensions and demands of various pressure groups? The election results on March 10 will give us the first indication. ■

Rahul Verma *is a Fellow with the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi*

INDIA'S GAMING MOMENT

WITH INDIA BECOMING A LARGE GAMING MARKET, WILL THE CENTRE'S PUSH FOR A TASK FORCE HELP CREATE MORE WORLD-CLASS DEVELOPERS AND JOBS FOR THE YOUTH?

BY M.G. ARUN

S. SRIVIDYA, 19, A COMMERCE STUDENT IN HYDERABAD, became an online gaming enthusiast during the pandemic since all her usual social interactions with her friends had come to a halt. Her choice was Valorant, a first-person tactical shooter game developed by US-based Riot Games, and made available in India in 2020. Since the game can be played only on a personal computer, she upgraded to a more expensive laptop with a gaming keyboard that has games-specific control keys highlighted. Since Valorant is played in teams of five, she invites four of her friends to join in as they battle with another team. The game's excellent graphics and dynamic characterisation got her hooked. "I like to play the girl character Jett, who uses wind, clouds and knives to take on her enemies," says Srividya, who turns to gaming any time she feels bored or has some free time.

Srividya is part of the growing tribe of Indian gamers—250 million in 2018, 440 million today—fuelling an Indian gaming industry that is already worth an estimated $2.4 billion (Rs 18,090 crore). As per consulting firm Accenture, worldwide, gaming/ esports is a $300 billion (Rs 22.5 lakh crore) business. Underlining the rising appeal of esports is its inclusion in the 2022 Asian Games. It will be one of the 37 sports played at the games to be held in Hangzhou, China, from September 10-25. India is still at a nascent stage in this industry, but has a lot of potential for growth. Consulting firm KPMG projects the

$300 BILLION
(Rs 22.5 LAKH CRORE)
SIZE OF THE GLOBAL GAMING INDUSTRY

$2.4 BILLION
(Rs 18,090 CRORE)
SIZE OF THE GAMING INDUSTRY IN INDIA

440 MILLION
GAMERS IN INDIA

$3.9 BILLION
(Rs 29,396 CRORE)
ESTIMATED SIZE OF INDIAN GAMING INDUSTRY BY 2025*

*KPMG estimate

LOGGED IN
A gamer at a gaming parlour in Dwarka, New Delhi

RAJWANT RAWAT

Location Courtesy United Gamers Network

> **“SETTING UP THE ANIMATION, VISUAL EFFECTS, GAMING AND COMICS (AVGC) PROMOTION TASK FORCE WILL HELP INDIA ACHIEVE ITS POTENTIAL OF CREATING 20 LAKH JOBS”**
>
> **JEHIL THAKKAR**
> Partner and Media and Entertainment Sector Leader, Deloitte India

industry to grow to $3.9 billion (Rs 29,396 crore) by 2025 in India.

Presenting the Union budget on February 1, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that the government is planning to set up an Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming and Comics (AVGC) promotion task force to recommend ways to employ youth and build domestic capacity to serve the Indian markets and global demand. As per the Confederation of Indian Industry and the Boston Consulting Group, India has less than 10 per cent of the global market share in VFX (visual effects) and animation at present. “The setting up of the task force will help India achieve its potential of creating 20 lakh jobs, according to Deloitte projections,” says Jehil Thakkar, partner, and media and entertainment sector leader, Deloitte India. “These are critical skills for growth of the metaverse and India is poised to take advantage of this ecosystem.” The metaverse is an online, 3D universe that combines multiple virtual spaces. Considered a future iteration of the internet, the metaverse allows users to work, meet, game and socialise together in these 3D spaces. In January, the government of Karnataka launched an AVGC Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru which also has a finishing school that offers courses on emerging technologies in these areas.

FROM PRODUCT TO EXPERIENCE

In April 2021, Accenture said that the value of the global gaming industry was more than the combined market for movies and music, driven by a surge in mobile gaming and an emphasis on social interaction during the pandemic. China, Japan, the UK and US were the world’s largest gaming markets. A whopping 2.7 billion people played games globally, with another 400 million expected to join the fray by the end of 2023. Of the new joinees, 60 per cent were women, and 30 per cent were under the age of 25. “The emergence of new gaming platforms and changing demographics are pushing gaming businesses away from being product-centric to becoming experience-oriented platforms,” says Seth Schuler, managing director, Accenture’s Software and Platforms industry group.

PUBG, the popular battle game from Chinese firm Tencent, used to be the favourite among Indian gamers until it was banned by the Indian government along with several other Chinese apps following border tensions with China in 2020. Free Fire, developed by Vietnamese firm 111dots Studio and published by Singapore’s Garena, gained in popularity following the PUBG ban, but this app was also banned by India recently citing a potential misuse of user data. However, the second version of the game, Free Fire Max

THE TOP-GROSSING GAMES IN INDIA

(on Google Play, as on Feb. 16, 2022)

1

CLASH OF CLANS by Supercell

500

2

GARENA FREE FIRE MAX by Garena International

100

3

BATTLEGROUNDS MOBILE INDIA by Krafton, Inc.

50

4

COIN MASTER by Moon Active

100

6

TEEN PATTI OCTRO: 3 PATTI GAME by Octro, Inc.

50

7

EFOOTBALL PES 2021 by Konami

100

8

CALL OF DUTY MOBILE SEASON1 by Activision Publishing, Inc.

100

9

EVONY
The King's Return

EVONY: THE KING'S RETURN by TG Inc.

50

remained available for download on Google Play Store at the time of writing this story.

In India, the gaming market has evolved from coin-based arcade games, such as Tekken in gaming parlours, to handheld consoles such as Nintendo, followed by PlayStation and Xboxes. A key factor that led to this growth was the high-paced development of technology infrastructure. In 2016, the launch of 4G services ensured high-speed internet and affordable data prices. The growth in digital payments infrastructure and in the internet and smartphone penetration helped too. An analysis by global consulting firm McKinsey found that, of the 17 mature and emerging economies, India is digitising faster than any other country, barring Indonesia. India is also slated to double the number of smartphones, to 650-700 million, by 2023. With the launch of 5G in India by next year, internet connections will have a higher bandwidth and lower response time, making the gaming experience all the more real-time. Plus, with schools and colleges shut due to the pandemic, many youngsters were compelled to give mobile gaming a try. In 2020, smartphone games accounted for almost 50 per cent of video gaming revenue worldwide.

WHY INDIA MATTERS

The huge demand from gamers is also driving game developers to work on India-focused content. "What works clearly for India is what I call ABCD—action, Bollywood, cricket and devotion," says Rajat Ojha, chief builder at Partynite.io, which calls itself "India's own metaverse". Some of the games developed in India include Real Snooker 3D developed by EivaaGames, World Cricket Championship developed by Nextwave Multimedia, FAU-G (Fearless and United Guards) developed by Bengaluru-based nCORE Games following the ban on PUBG, Ludo King from Mumbai-based Gametion Technologies, and Raji, an action-adventure game set in ancient India.

Just how important gaming has become for tech companies is evident from Microsoft's acquisition of California-based video game company Activision Blizzard Inc. in January for $69 billion (Rs 5.2 lakh crore), shattering all previous records. With this, Microsoft has become the world's third-largest gaming company by revenue, behind China's Tencent and Japan's Sony. Activision's Candy Crush Saga and Call of Duty: Season 1 are among India's top 10 highest-grossing Android games. In July, Swedish gaming company Modern Times Group acquired Bengaluru-based word games developer PlaySimple for $360 million (Rs 2,720 crore).

The surging interest in online gaming is driving investors' interest in the segment. A report by investment banking platform Maple Capital Advisors said that gaming start-ups in India have attracted $1.6 billion (Rs 12,000 crore) in 43 deals between January and September 2021. Around 90 per cent of the investments went to two large players in the fantasy sports and platform gaming sector, with Dream Sports and the Mobile Premier League raising $785 million (Rs 5,917.5 crore) and $375 million (Rs 2,826.8 crore), respectively. Dream Sports announced an additional $840 million (Rs 6,332 crore) funding round on November 24. Media reports say top venture firms Accel and Matrix Partners India have invested millions of dollars in firms like PlayShifu, Zupee and Winzo.

The rising interest in games has also led to gaming tournaments being organised in India. The India Today Group's Free Fire India Today League gaming tournament in 2019 saw over 125,000 participants from across India. The group's ESports Premier League using Free Fire was a first-ever franchisee format tournament, much like the IPL format in cricket, and saw over a million registrations.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Despite the surging interest in gaming, many issues need to be addressed in this industry. One area that can be improved is the quality of the games being developed in India. Overseas developers pump in hundreds of crores of rupees into game development, making such games more endearing to gamers. "These are 'AAA' games, or games that have a high development and market budget of anywhere between Rs 100 crore and Rs 200 crore," says Vishwalok Nath, business head, gaming and esports, India Today Group, adding that it is akin to developing a big-budget movie and the graphics look quite realistic.

Moreover, the focus on gaming in India is in the services space rather than on creating proprietary products that command a higher value. Yet another challenge in India is dealing with the taboo around gaming. Most parents still view gaming as something that diverts their children's attention from studies. They fear it can have an adverse impact on their mental and physical health. Industry players feel this can be addressed by creating more awareness around gaming. "The inclusion of esports in the Asian Games adds a lot of legitimacy to this segment," says Aneesh Aravind, country manager, India, Krafton, a South Korean gaming company. Moreover, the fact that it can create employment for the youth is an added attraction. There are also several popular Indian gamers with a formidable number of followers on YouTube. Total Gaming, a YouTube channel operated by gamer Ajay (he prefers not to mention his surname), has over 30 million subscribers. Naman Mathur, better known by his pseudonym Mortal, has over 7 million followers on YouTube. The lack of good training facilities in gaming is another hindrance. Ojha says that there are very few colleges in India that teach any structured gaming courses at present. Moreover, there is a dearth of experts to conduct such courses, which calls for more foreign collaborations in this segment.

The taboo around gaming is slowly lifting in India. But for the country to tap its real potential, it would need to focus on improving collaborations with overseas companies that have gone way ahead in developing proprietary products. It also needs to nurture skills in this space and include specialised gaming courses in colleges. The setting up of the task force is a firm step in this regard. ■

DOWNLOADS in million

5

CANDY CRUSH SAGA
by King
1,000

10

GENSHIN IMPACT
by Cognosphere Pte. Ltd.
10

Source: AppBrain

> **"THE INCLUSION OF ESPORTS IN THE ASIAN GAMES ADDS A LOT OF LEGITIMACY TO THIS SEGMENT"**
>
> **ANEESH ARAVIND**
> Country Manager India, Krafton

OBITUARY: RAHUL BAJAJ (1938-2022)

Master of the Rough Road

Known for speaking his mind, India's top industrialist championed domestic competitiveness while also changing swiftly with the times

By M.G. Arun

'You just can't beat a Bajaj.' So went the tagline for one of Bajaj Auto's popular advertisements. When it came to candour, few could beat Rahul Bajaj, chairman emeritus of the Bajaj Group, who passed away in Pune on February 12 at the age of 83. Here's an instance. The year 2000-'01 was one of the toughest for his business. After several years of high growth, sales had fallen over three per cent, to Rs 3,588 crore. Operating profits and margins had almost halved as competition, both domestic and foreign, snapped at the company's heels. Bajaj knew it was time for a shake-up of the company culture, which by then had come to take success for granted. "It has been an article of faith for us at Bajaj Auto to say things as they are—be they good or bad, without exaggeration or sugarcoating. As your chief fiduciary, I have no intention of departing from this practice," he said at the company's annual general meeting that year. "The hard fact is that 2000-'01 has been a bad year for your company—financially the worst year in its recent history." He went on to announce a big shift in the company's focus, increasing the volumes and market share of motorcycles, growing the market for geared scooters as well as introducing four-stroke versions, a big push toward ungeared scooters and a thrust on higher productivity and cost reduction.

The effort paid off. The following year, sales grew 15 per cent year-on-year to Rs 4,126 crore. The company's operating profit doubled, registering as the second highest in its history. This came about despite the economic turmoil caused by the aftershocks of the terrible Bhuj earthquake, the September 11 attack on the US, the terrorist attack on Parliament and the Gujarat riots. The company also launched a most formidable product—the Bajaj Pulsar—in November that year, transforming the market from one of small-capacity two-wheelers to high-powered bikes, and capturing the imagination of the Indian youth. Today, Bajaj Auto is one of India's largest two-wheeler manufacturers, selling 363,443 units of two-wheelers and commercial vehicles in January 2022. It is also one of the country's biggest exporters, selling 2.2 million units of its two-wheelers in the overseas market in calendar year 2021.

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> **Bajaj never minced words and, most often, they found their mark. At an awards ceremony in 2019, he expressed his concerns over what he described as 'tax terrorism' to a group including three Union ministers**

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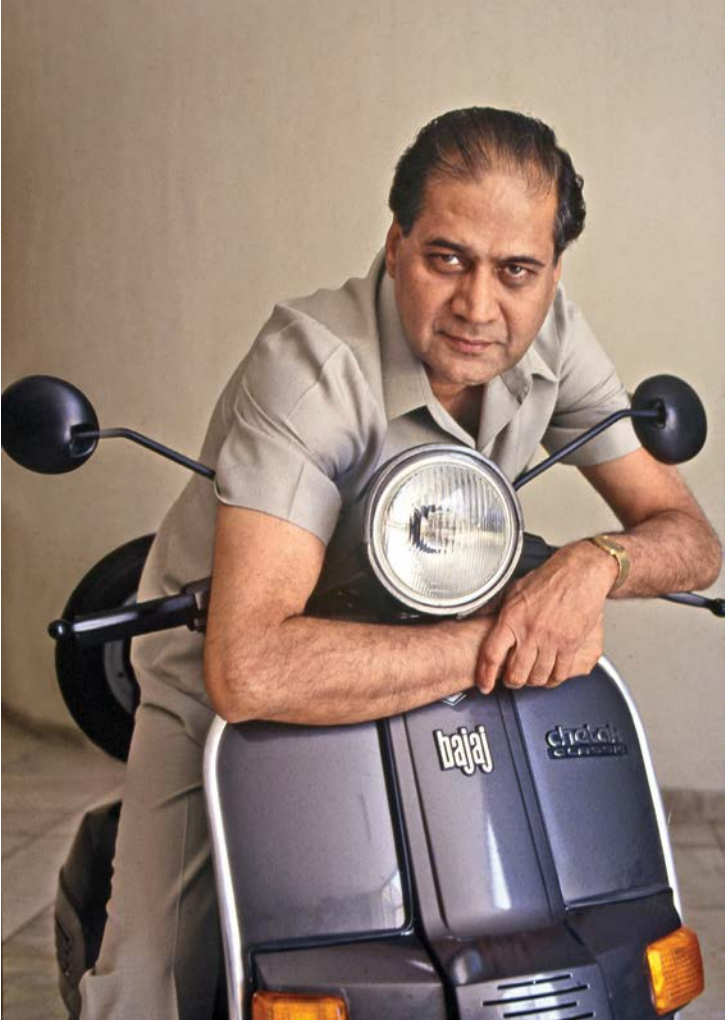
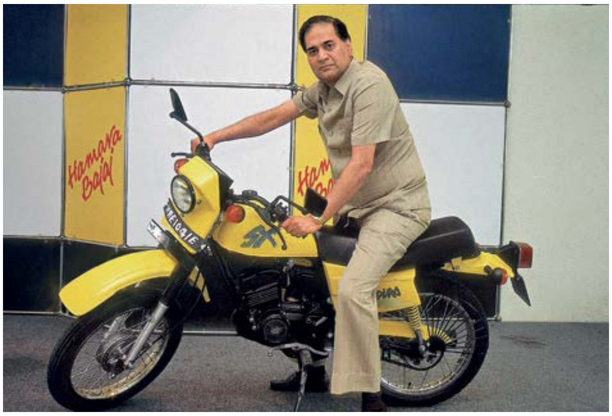
That was the quintessential Bajaj. He never minced words and, most often, they found their mark. "It is not possible for me to praise anybody. I was not born that way," he said at an awards ceremony in 2019, addressing three Union ministers seated on stage, as he went on to express his concern over what he called "tax terrorism" and a general "environment of intolerance" in the country. It is another question whether everyone agreed with him. But, in the end, he would win critics over with a disarming smile. If perchance a journalist questioned him about the Bombay Club (a group of eight famous industrialists, including Lala Bharat Ram, Lalit Mohan Thapar, Hari Shankar Singhania and Bajaj, who wrote to then-finance minister Manmohan Singh in 1993 asking for a level playing field for the Indian industry in the post-liberalisation era), he would spend time explain-



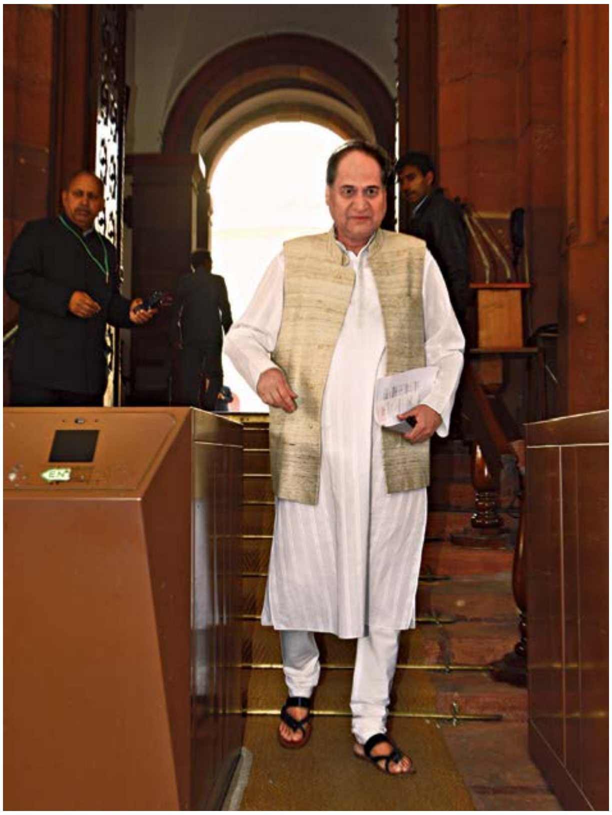
NAMAS BHOJANI

RACHIT GOSWAMI

AS THE YEARS ROLLED ON (Clockwise from top left)
Bajaj on a Chetak scooter in 1993; Bajaj garlanding a Chetak; Bajaj on a bike in 1994; Bajaj at Parliament as a Rajya Sabha member in 2009; Bajaj flanked by his sons Rajiv (L) and Sanjiv, with his cousins Niraj, Shekhar and Madhur (L–R) standing behind



FAWZAN HUSAIN

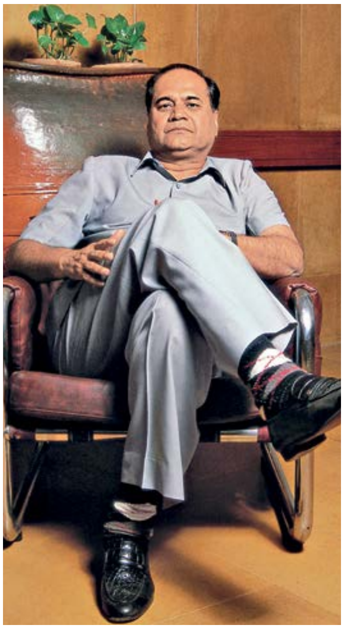


HEMANT CHAWLA

ing why he believed Indian governments weren't doing enough to protect domestic industry. Maruti Suzuki chairman R.C. Bhargava feels critics misunderstood Bajaj on this 'protectionist stand'. Being a nationalist, Bajaj wanted Indian industry to grow, but he was also a realist who recognised that Indian manufacturers were greatly disadvantaged compared to their foreign counterparts, says Bhargava. For all his calls for protectionism, Bajaj also knew how to make foreign partnerships work—Bajaj Auto had a rather successful run with Japan's Kawasaki for nearly three decades, starting in the 1990s. Bajaj also championed the cause of Indian industry at international forums for over four decades. Since 1979, he had been a leading light at the World Economic Forum in Davos, founded by his close friend Klaus Schwab, rarely missing a year at the event.

Bajaj was one of the few industrialists who saw their businesses thrive both during the licence raj and the open economy post the 1991 liberalisation. He started his journey with the Bajaj Group in 1965 and became managing director in 1972 after the demise of his father, Kamalnayan Bajaj. The Group had been set up by his grandfather Jamnalal Bajaj, a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, in 1926. The Bajaj family was also closely involved with India's Independence movement. Rahul Bajaj loved to flaunt his family connections with the Nehru-Gandhi families and proudly said in many interviews that he was named by Jawaharlal Nehru.

It was under Rahul Bajaj that the group diversified into insurance, financial services and electrical products. The diversification into financial services was a game-changer, making the group the third-largest Indian family business, after those controlled by the Ambani and Adani families, with a market capitalisation (m-cap) of Rs 8.5 lakh crore as on February 11. The group, run by Bajaj, his sons, and his three cousins—Shekhar, Niraj and Madhur Bajaj—comprises 40 companies, employing 36,000 people worldwide. The group's listed companies had total standalone revenues of Rs 59,364 crore and standalone profits of Rs 9,123.8 crore in 2020-'21. Bajaj Finance, led by Rahul Bajaj's younger son Sanjiv, is the seventh-largest Indian company in terms of its m-cap (Rs 4.3 lakh crore), while Bajaj Finserv was ranked 20th with Rs 2.6 lakh crore as on February 15. A family division in 2007 saw the exit of Rahul's brother Shishir from the group, along with Shishir's son Kushagra Nayan Bajaj, moving on to run separate businesses that include Bajaj Hindusthan Sugar and Bajaj Energy. After passing the baton on to Rajiv and Sanjiv, Bajaj spent a lot of time travelling, often in his private jet, meeting people and sharing his views on various industry platforms at home and abroad.


PUSHPENDU CHAUDHRY

> **"Our soft power of civilisation and inherent tolerance of diversity have been around for some time. We have to now marry them with the hard economic power that the world today respects more than anything else"**

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Rahul Bajaj will perhaps be most remembered for the iconic Bajaj Chetak, a scooter modelled on Italian two-wheeler maker Piaggio's Vespa Sprint, which was a runaway success for several years. In 1989, when brands like Kinetic Honda and Vespa began snapping at its heels, Bajaj Auto went on to launch its famous 'Hamara Bajaj' campaign, conceived by ad agency Lintas. It is another matter that Bajaj had to cede to son Rajiv's decision to scrap scooters from Bajaj Auto's portfolio in 2009 to focus on motorcycles. Maybe his point was vindicated when a whole new generation of scooters led by Honda Activa began to find a big market again, forcing Rajiv to re-introduce the Chetak in an electric avatar in 2020.

Bajaj Auto's battles for market share with Hero MotorCorp are legendary. But for all his aggression in protecting his turf, Rahul Bajaj had an extremely soft corner for Brijmohan Lall Munjal, the late founder of rival Hero MotorCorp, whom he publicly referred to as his guru. "Over the years, we fought very fiercely in the marketplace, first with Hero Honda, then with Hero MotoCorp. There was no give and take. Yet, we remained very good friends," he said, when Munjal passed away in 2015. A Rajya Sabha member from 2006 to 2010, Bajaj stressed the need for an astute political leadership, a supportive business environment and a strong partnership between the government and business. "Our soft power of civilisation and inherent tolerance of diversity have been around for some time. We have to now marry them with the hard economic power that the world today respects more than anything else," he said at the India Today Conclave in 2005. Those words have a lot of relevance even in today's context. ■

BAPPI LAHIRI – 1952-2022

The Ultimate Showman

Bappi Lahiri brought in musical influences from across the world to give us some timeless Bollywood classics

By Tanishk Bagchi

Bappi Lahiri or Bappi da, as he was known to everyone, stayed musically ahead of the curve by bringing new trends to Bollywood. He introduced disco and electro pop beats to Hindi music, giving us songs that we are dancing to till date. And to have done this when composers didn't even have the luxury of platforms like YouTube and Spotify, which make international music easily accessible, is all the more impressive. He heard music from across the world and invested time to be in sync with what the world was doing. As much as the West inspired him, his music was equally commercial Bollywood. Just listen to '*Aaj Rapat Jaayen To*' from *Namak Halal*. Coming from a musical family from West Bengal, there's a lot of Bengali folk influence in his music too.

He was an adept tabla player himself and was open to different kinds of voices and instruments. Nowadays when one singer's career takes off, composers rush to him or her. Bappi Da wasn't like that. He would seek out new singers, ones who hadn't necessarily made a name for themselves till then. Every singer he introduced had a unique voice. He created beautiful tunes with just the right voices to bring them to life, like Salma Agha in '*Jhoom Jhoom Jhoom Baba*' (*Kasam Paida Karne Wale Ki*). Recently, when I heard the song play out to the trailer of the Hollywood film *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*, I felt it could have easily been mistaken for a contemporary track, like a Dua Lipa song. This was no remix or cover and it still sounded so fresh. I'm sure that there was a dancer hidden inside Bappi da. How else could someone have created so many foot-tapping melodies and get the groove right every time?

When Bappi da heard that I had recreated his superhit song '*Tamma Tamma Loge*' (*Thanedaar*) for *Badrinath ki Dulhania*, he called and I was surprised at how he knew everything about my career. He was very happy. He asked me to come home and have *roshogolla*. I made it a point to retain his voice for the new version of '*Tamma Tamma*'. I just knew the song's appeal and success were intricately linked to his rendition. After hearing his voice several times, I realised that no one can sing the way he does. When Bappi Da sang a Hindi song, he was like, "I am Bappi da. I am a Bengali guy, so if some Hindi words come with a Bengali twang, so be it." It was the sweetest part of his singing and you can't copy that. I had reached out to him just before the first lockdown. I wanted to get disco back, but with a twist. And who could be better than Bappi da to collaborate on this with? I still have his message: "Anytime you call me, I am here only. I will come and jam and we will make something."

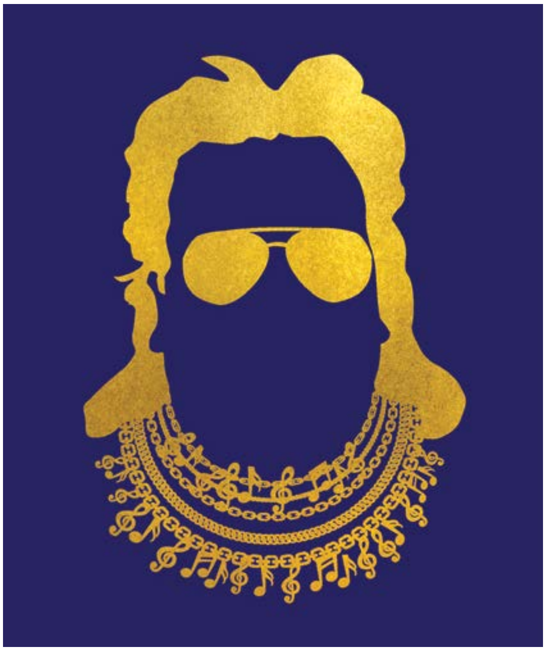


Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

He was a true showman of the composing world. Artists these days groom themselves to become something they are not. They work out or do some dance so that people follow them on Instagram. They don't enjoy their own selves. What set Bappi da apart was that he enjoyed himself. He was comfortable in his own skin. He knew he was the star. He always wore his aura on his sleeve. He didn't need a publicist or marketing strategy to promote himself.

This is why he was one legend who always inspired and encouraged me. He belongs to an esteemed rank of composers whose work will last for generations to come. We all instantly remember his face when his songs play. That's the mark of a true legend. That's how history is made. ■

Tanishk Bagchi *is the popular composer behind one of 2021's biggest hits* 'Raataan Lambiyan'. *He also recreated Bappi Lahiri's iconic* 'Tamma Tamma Loge'
(As told to Suhani Singh)

SANDIP BHOWMICK

The Not So Big Fat Indian Wedding

The wedding industry in India has had to reinvent itself in the past two years, with the pandemic forcing it to go leaner, cleaner and virtual

BY SHELLY ANAND & ROMITA DATTA

WEDDINGWIRE INDIA

MODERN MATRIMONY: (clockwise from left) Kolkata couple Abhishek Das and Debadeepta Basak greet their guests via video; a *baraat* is welcomed with guests watching on Zoom; Rashmi Agarwal's daughter's wedding being screened for virtual guests

A NEW ERA

- Seated dinners are being prioritised over buffets
- Dishes featuring plant-based meats have made it to wedding menus post Covid-19
- Guest lists are shrinking, keeping in mind government restrictions and, increasingly, the family's preference
- Personalisation is in—from decor and wedding stationery to coasters and couple hashtags

In January, news of India's first "metaverse" wedding reception went viral. As per reports, the couple from Tamil Nadu sent invites to their 2,000 guests in the form of non-fungible tokens to attend the virtual ceremony to be held at Hogwarts, or, more accurately, a digital recreation of the school of magic. This Harry Potter-themed wedding is only one example of how the wedding industry in India has changed during the pandemic.

This might be an extreme case, but young couples and wedding planners across the country have had to adjust and adapt to the changing situations in a Covid-stricken world. No longer do hybrid weddings, where the majority of the guests join in via Zoom or watch a livestream of the wedding ceremony, sound strange.

Take the case of Sandipan Sarkar and Aditi Das. The Burdwan couple had to postpone their wedding, initially scheduled for August 2021, to January 2022, but while preparations for the big day were in full swing, Sarkar tested positive for Covid. Not willing to wait longer, the two decided on a hybrid wedding as soon as Sarkar recovered. Around 50 family members were invited to attend in-person and the event was livestreamed via Facebook Live and YouTube for their other guests. "Having to reduce the number of guests was difficult. My aunt and her family based in Kashmir had already booked their tickets and my friends in Bengaluru, Noida and Mumbai were looking forward to attending. I could neither dishearten them nor take the risk of crowding the venue with 350-odd guests. I felt the hybrid mode would make everyone feel included," says Sarkar. He even ensured that all the guests attending the event, physically or virtually, got a feast. He tied up with Zomato to deliver wedding meals at the doorstep of each guest.

Delhi-based singer and composer Rashmi Agarwal's daughter, too, got married in Mumbai in July 2021 in a small ceremony. All the rituals were done at home with just 25 to 30 close friends and family physically present and 150-200 guests, including Rashmi's son in Singapore, joining in from different parts of the world via Zoom.

The Indian wedding industry, estimated to be worth $50 billion (around Rs 3.7 lakh crore) in a 2017 KPMG report, has been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. The over-the-top, multi-event, four-to-five-day celebrations have given way to one-day weddings with guest lists pared down to just 50-100, depending on the limit set by each state, as opposed to 500-1,000 that was the norm. This has taken a heavy toll on the formal and informal sectors associated with the wedding industry.

INDUSTRY BLUES

According to Namit Agnihotri, area general manager, The Roseate Hotels & Resorts, “The Covid norms change almost weekly. In January 2022, for instance, we have had almost 60-70 per cent cancellations and about 30-40 per cent postponements.” The Indian wedding market, the second-largest after the US, was impacted severely during the second Covid wave in 2021 when the business was shut down completely. “The size and scale of the wedding industry has been affected to the tune of 60-70 per cent and since a large part of the wedding business is informal, you can understand the impact down the chain. High-end hotels, caterers and florists would be able to quantify the loss in numbers, but what about the small decorator, electrician, cook caterer and the *kirana* shops?” asks Nilanjan Ghosh, director, Observer Research Foundation, a think-tank in Delhi.

Rajat Ray, a Kolkata-based wedding photographer, used to book 12 to 20 gigs a year, charging 45,000 for each event. In 2021, though, Ray managed to book just six events and had to slash his fee to Rs 25,000. Bhaskar Karmakar, in the profession since 1998, says things have never been this bad before. The photographer, also from Kolkata, had invested heavily in cameras, lights and other accessories for wedding videography shortly before the pandemic. When the pandemic struck, he was forced to do odd jobs to pay the EMI on the loan he had taken to buy the equipment. “I have joined Zomato and am delivering food and grocery orders to be able to earn,” he says.

Prateek Kashyap, founder director of Made in Heaven, a Gurugram-based wedding planning company, says that wedding photography budgets have been cut due to reduction in the number of wedding events. Plus, ceremonies have now changed to, what are known as, “minimonies”—smaller, more intimate events. A few of Kashyap’s clients have even asked for the wedding pictures to be delivered electronically only.

Minimonies also mean that business for bandwalas and caterers has dried up too. With smaller gatherings the new norm, there is no *baraat* procession. “We used to have 20 to 25 musicians playing in a programme, but now only eight to 10 are allowed. Out of 70 people in my orchestra, I have kept 30 and the rest are on their own, getting by on some token financial assistance,” says Mohammad Zahid of Sohrab Band, Kolkata. Caterers too have seen a reduction in their earnings. Ratan Barua of J.N. Barua Confectionery, Kolkata, has seen a 50 per cent dip in demand and, consequently, earnings, while Ranjan Neogi of Continental Catering Services, a Kolkata-based chain, says he has lost at least 70 per cent of his earnings due to the pandemic.

Photographer: SNAPPED STUDIO
Courtesy: WedMeGood

THE GUEST BOOK

The state-wise guest limit for weddings and the change in policy after the easing of restrictions in Jan-Feb

DELHI
THEN: Up to 20 guests for a gathering at home or at court
NOW: Up to 200 guests

MADHYA PRADESH
THEN: Up to 250 guests
NOW: No cap

MAHARASHTRA
THEN: Up to 50 guests
NOW: 25 per cent of the capacity of the open ground/ banquet halls; maximum 200

TAMIL NADU
Up to 100 guests

UTTAR PRADESH
Up to 100 guests in open spaces

KARNATAKA
200 guests allowed in open spaces; 100 in closed spaces

RAJASTHAN
THEN: Up to 100 guests
NOW: 250 guests (excluding the wedding band)

WEDDINGS REIMAGINED

The millennial’s idea of a wedding is informed by tradition, but is far from traditional. It’s more practical and tech-enabled. They are more conscious about reducing their carbon footprint and making a positive impact. There have been several

GREEN AND CLEAN
A groom and his *baraat* arrive on cycles for a sustainable wedding

Hi-Tech Nuptials

Wedtech apps have made wedding planning not just safer but also more convenient. Here are some of the top apps for those about to tie the knot

WEDMEGOOD
Founded in 2014
A one-stop shop, the app can help you create wedding invitations and choose your vendors. The app has seen a monthly download of over 75,000 and 3 million total users.

RSVP MANAGER
Founded in 2020
The app helps users manage guest logistics—track their arrival and departure, meal preferences. The app needs to be bought from WeddingWishlist. It has over 1,000 users.

APPY COUPLE
Founded in 2011
Appy allows couples to design and customise their own wedding app and website. The website has about 129,452 monthly visits and saw 1,998 app downloads over the past 30 days.

WEDDING PLANNER BY WEDDINGWIRE
Founded in 2017
It connects couples and their families with local wedding professionals. It has over 500,000 users and over a million downloads.

instances of couples opting for "green" or "zero-waste" weddings, with the bride and groom sending guests home with saplings to plant in their own homes. This need for sustainability is another reason why hybrid weddings have taken off. According to Kanika Subbiah, founder, Wedding Wishlist, an online wedding planning company, "The pandemic may have been a significant factor in the meteoric rise of virtual weddings, but celebrations in India would have gotten here eventually even without Covid. Virtual weddings are cost-effective, better for the environment, easier to organise and more intimate."

The industry is adapting on the fly. WeddingWire India, a wedding planning app and part of The Knot Worldwide, has partnered with matchmaking portal Shaadi.com as their official vendor partner to launch their WeddingsFromHome campaign.

Technology has played a huge part in the survival of the wedding industry. "Wedtech is affordable, accessible and helps ease communication—physical cards are no good in a world where circumstances and wedding plans change often," says Subbiah. With the use of technology, couples can communicate better with their guests. It has also helped them shortlist venues via virtual tours, find vendors, make-up artists and mehndi-walas, among other services.

"Wedtech apps are on the verge of becoming a crucial part of the mainstream wedding culture in India," says Anam Zubair, associate director of marketing, WeddingWire India. As per WeddingWire statistics, there were around 250,000-300,000 couples in India using the internet to find wedding vendors in 2020 itself.

A STEP INTO THE FUTURE

In the final quarter of 2021, as the Delta wave receded, a positive movement in the industry was visible as weddings resumed. The first '*maha saya*' (auspicious period) on November 21 saw 8,000 weddings held in one day in just Delhi itself. As per estimates by the Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT), around 2.5 million weddings took place in November and December. "On our platform, we witnessed a surge of 57 per cent in November 2021 compared to the same period in the previous year," says Zubair. They are, in fact, seeing a significant demand for the upcoming summer wedding season, between April 17 and July 22, with 58 per cent of *mahurat* dates of the year falling in this period.

Interestingly, many couples are opting for 'non-*saaya*' dates. Statistics gathered by WeddingWire India reveal a 76 per cent surge in demand for such dates in the first half of 2022 compared to the previous year. Bengaluru has the most demand for non-*saaya* weddings at 16 per cent, Mumbai follows at 12 per cent and Jaipur, 11 per cent.

The pandemic might have altered the wedding industry forever, bringing in changes that are most definitely here to stay, according to industry experts. But will the Indian wedding no longer be big and fat? "No! We don't think the wedding industry will be 'slim or trim'. The majority of the population still wants to get married with all their family and friends by their side," says Zubair. The year 2022 might just be one of resurgence for the industry. ■

It Takes *A Village...*

...to show how to keep Covid at bay. Welcome to Veewan, a remote hamlet in Kashmir

By **MOAZUM MOHAMMAD** IN SRINAGAR

PANDEMIC-PROOF Healthcare workers at Veewan

ABID BHAT

Unbelievable but true: a village in Kashmir has remained Covid-free through three waves of the pandemic. The remote village of Veewan in north Kashmir's Bandipora district—currently under a blanket of snow—has an adult population of 362. Wali Mohammad, a health official who was deputed to the village last July to conduct Covid tests, recounts: "The village is inaccessible. We trekked 17 km on foot to get there," says the 47-year-old paramedic. "Not a single resident was apprehensive about Covid and people were engrossed in their daily routines."

It was the time Bandipora was emerging as a Covid hotspot. Veewan, located 28 km from the district headquarters, was feared to be affected. According to Dr Masarat Iqbal Wani, the district nodal officer for Covid, a team was sent to Veewan. The team started door-to-door Covid testing and issued guidelines. Masks, hand sanitisers and medicines were distributed. "It would have been disastrous had the virus spread here since supplying oxygen to the village would have been impossible," says Wani.

HAPPINESS MANTRA

"We are determined to beat Covid. All adults and eligible teenagers here have taken the vaccine"

—ALI MOHAMMAD, RESIDENT OF VEEWAN

The team did not find any infected individual. This was attributed to the remoteness of the village and its thin population. "In January this year, we camped in the village for three days and conducted 275 Covid tests," says Mohd Wali. "Last year, we conducted 265 tests. None tested positive on both occasions."

When the administration began door-to-door vaccination for Covid, Wali and his team reached Veewan again. The villagers, he says, overcame vaccine hesitancy after being counselled. In July last year, Veewan shot into prominence for becoming the first village to have fully vaccinated its eligible population against Covid. The achievement drew applause from Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The village is basking in glory again. On January 16, a health team trudged through knee-deep snow to vaccinate all eligible 15 to 18-year-olds of Veewan. ■

Happiness Quest: *A joint enterprise of India Today and the RPG Group celebrating exemplary initiatives to spread happiness*

BEATING SOCIAL MEDIA BLUES

DR HIRAK PATEL

Counselling psychologist, Fortis Hospital, Mulund, Mumbai

BE AWARE: It is important to be mindful about how you use social media. Avoid it when it's negatively impacting you.

EXERCISE WILLPOWER: Improve your willpower to say 'no'. Do not give in to social pressure and stay obsessed with your social media feed. Set boundaries for usage and stick to them.

SEEK HELP: If you are unable to resist the temptation, turn to a friend or family member for assistance. Having support from your dear ones can really help in such situations.

TURN OFF NOTIFICATIONS: Fix a time in the day for social media rather than indulge in it every time there is a notification. Keep it off at night time and early morning.

TRY THERAPY: If you feel you are addicted to social media and it is affecting your wellbeing, seek professional help. Therapy can go a long way in helping you find balance and positivity online.

-As told to Sonali Acharjee

LEISURE

RIAZ DEAN: MARKING THE SPOT
PG 59

SUNIL JANAH: INDIA IN THE MAKING
PG 64

THE CYCLISTS MOVING MOUNTAINS
PG 62

Q&A WITH SANIA MIRZA
PG 66

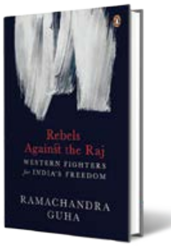
The rebels in **RAMACHANDRA GUHA'S** book all respect Mahatma Gandhi, but also sometimes disagree with him

BOOKS

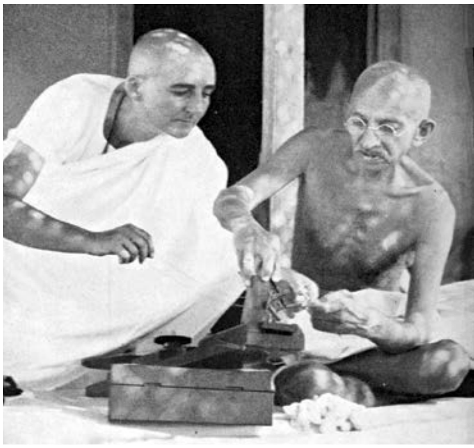
THE FOREIGN HAND OF FRIENDSHIP

In his new book, *Rebels Against the Raj*, historian **Ramachandra Guha** tells us stories of seven Indian freedom fighters who all came from the West

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR



REBELS AGAINST THE RAJ
Western fighters for India's freedom
by Ramachandra Guha
PENGUIN
₹799; 496 pages



Benjamin Guy Horniman came to Calcutta in 1904. Unlike his colleagues at *The Statesman*—British journalists who went to the races in the afternoon and the Bengal Club after—Horniman preferred keeping his nose to the grindstone. He travelled widely. He wrote about rural suffering and Hindu-Muslim strife. Protesting the partition of Bengal, he walked barefoot on Calcutta's streets, 'dressed in a white *dhoti*, *kurta* and *chadder* like an Indian patriot'. In 1919, when he was editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*, he again stood out. As Mahatma Gandhi arrived at Chowpatty to protest the Rowlatt Bills, only 'one Englishman' was seen in the big, bustling crowd—Horniman.

Reading Ramachandra Guha's *Rebels Against the Raj*, it becomes clear that Horniman was more catalyst than he was exception. Deported for 'openly, explicitly, identifying with the nationalists against the Raj', the campaign for his return to India finally came to be championed by the likes of H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. "But he was still kept out for seven years," says Guha, speaking to us over Zoom. Horniman's dissent, Guha feels, interrupts the colonial narrative of supremacy: "We must remember there were only 200,000 British people ruling this large, diverse and densely populated country. Because they were so few, they needed to be convinced they were innately superior to brown people—not just economically, technologically or politically but morally, ethically, and culturally, too."

In *Rebels...*, Guha adds Horniman to his cast of seven foreign freedom fighters—four British, two American, one Irish. Though they are dissimilar in several, obvious ways, they do also have a few things in common: they are all white-skinned, they are all upstanding, and they all 'saw in another nation the possibility of pursuing social and political ideals that make human life more appealing everywhere'. The majority of their stories are unknown, but as Guha makes evident, their courage was also unlikely.

Daughter of a British naval officer, Madeleine Slade, for instance, was only 31 when she first heard of Gandhi in 1924. Her immersion in his philosophy was soon near-complete. By the time she arrived at Sabarmati in 1925, she had adopted vegetarianism and learnt how to sit cross-legged for long hours. While Slade called Gandhi 'Bapu', he adopted her and called her 'Mira'. Even though Mira was initially tasked with looking after Gandhi's spinning wheel, her participation in India's freedom struggle was more than just symbolic. Her activism worried the British enough to have her jailed.

As it happens, all seven of Guha's renegades were either imprisoned, detained or deported at some point or another. "I think it shows the depth of one's commitment," says Guha. "Also, I didn't want to just write a book about foreigners who became Indians—that would have to include many mystics, teachers, doctors, social workers—so I used one defining condition: jail or deportation."

Philip Spratt, we see, writes the most delightful letters to his Tamil lover from inside prison. There is zeal in the Communist's writing, but also a warm tenderness. In some of the other letters that Guha has found in his research—especially those that foreign freedom fighters wrote to Gandhi—we find a respect that often stops short of veneration, leaving room for disagreement. In November 1924, American social worker Samuel Stokes wrote Gandhi a letter, openly opposing the Mahatma's desire to make spinning mandatory for all Congress members. A critic of his satyagraha movement, Annie Besant once told Gandhi in a trenchant missive, 'You little realise how you have led young men

ALL SEVEN OF RAMACHANDRA GUHA'S RENEGADES WERE EITHER IMPRISONED, DETAINED OR DEPORTED AT SOME POINT OR ANOTHER

← **MAKING INDIA HOME** Sarala Behn (Catherine Mary Heilemann) with her disciples; and Mira (Madeleine Slade) with Gandhi (1936)

of good impulses but thoughtless, to break their most solemn pledges, [to] take your vow.'

"Gandhi was a towering figure," says Guha. "It took a lot of courage to disagree with the most popular, influential and charismatic person of his age." Having abandoned their original nationalities to become Indian, Guha's rebels were never blindly loyal to their adopted country. "If they found faults in Indian society, they spotlighted it and sought to correct it." The century-long span of Guha's book (1893-1984) is, perhaps, enough to make one realise that India's freedom wasn't the only goal of these brave foreigners. They each also wanted an independent India to take along all its citizens as it progressed. Catherine Mary Heilemann (Sarala Behn), for example, didn't just establish a pioneering girls' school in the Kumaon hills at Kausani, she even went on to train activists who led the Chipko Andolan.

While his deft, enjoyable prose makes Guha a treat to read, the real context of his book, one suspects, can be found between his lines. Having released in the 75th year of India's independence, *Rebels...*, of course, brings to the forefront contributions that might have otherwise perished as footnotes, but it also does something more essential—it forces us to consider our notions of loyalty and nationalism. "India has always been an extraordinarily diverse place and has always had long-standing exchanges with other cultures," says Guha. "I think it's a pity that in the present climate, we have begun to feel that we have so much to teach the world but nothing to learn from it." Guha does, however, add that India isn't alone in its jingoism and xenophobia. "If there is a morality tale here, it's also applicable to the Brexiters of the UK, to white supremacists of the States, to countries like Turkey and even China." ■

—Shreevatsa Nevatia

THE STONE TOWER
Ptolemy, the Silk Road and a 2,000-year-old Riddle
by Riaz Dean
PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE
₹599, 226 pages

RIAZ DEAN
THE STONE TOWER
Ptolemy, the Silk Road, and a 2,000-Year-Old Riddle

BOOKS

MARKING THE SPOT

RIAZ DEAN BELIEVES HE HAS FOUND THE LOCATION OF THE HISTORIC TOWER THAT STOOD BETWEEN ASIA AND EUROPE

T

The Silk Road, considered to be the earliest highway in the world, has fascinated scholars ever since the first century scholar Claudius Ptolemy wrote about it. For centuries, caravans trundled along the road, trading in silk, jade, spices, horses and slaves. Because of their travels, two continents discovered each other and the encounter between their cultures and religions changed human history. So important is this route that the present Chinese government has decided to expand trade in an ambitious—and controversial—Belt and Road initiative.

Ptolemy listed thousands of places along the route in his monumental atlas of the ancient world, *Geographia*. A dozen times he mentions a Stone Tower on top of a revered mountain, which marks the midpoint in the route linking Asia and Europe. But Ptolemy was vague in his descriptions of the tower and often wrong in his maps, which, for centuries, misdirected scholars and explorers, including Christopher Columbus. Ptolemy's long-lost work was rediscovered by a monk in the Middle Ages and scholars have since then debated the exact location of the Stone Tower.

RIAZ DEAN says identifying the tower would help in future excavations and understanding the route's history

Historian-geographer Riaz Dean attempts to solve the 2,000-year-old riddle in *The Stone Tower*. Sifting through dozens of descriptions and relying on modern cartographical tools and NASA photographs, Dean says that identifying the landmark would help in future excavations and understanding of the history of civilisations that existed along the route.

The tower was a special place high up in the sacred mountains in a region known as the Roof of the World. It was the gateway into and out of the western regions of China. Dean himself retraced a long section of the Silk Road and published his early findings in a journal article in 2015.

The book is divided into three sections. The first describes the birth of the Silk Road; the second covers key historical events that mark the establishment of the tower as the midpoint in the road. Dean narrates the history and life of two major tribes that ruled the area. The Kushans were middlemen in the trade between the two continents. They were soon replaced by the Sogdians, of Aryan descent, who originated in Persia and now occupy a region covered by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The third section—it makes for dense reading—describes how he honed in on the actual location of the Tower. Dean peppers each chapter with an imaginary description of the life of traders over a span of 300 years, bringing alive the caravanserais where the convoys rested and traded before moving on. The rest of the book would suit a scholar or a history buff but the whole is lightened by maps and photographs. ■

—G. Krishnan

ARUN SANKAR/GETTY IMAGES

ARUN SANKAR/GETTY IMAGES

All Fur Love

IT'S RAINING CATS AND DOGS IN THE WORLD OF INDIAN LITERARY ANTHOLOGIES

Funny, sad and sometimes astonishing, these two must-have books are really more about people than about their non-human companions. The writing is average, but the stories are riveting all the same.

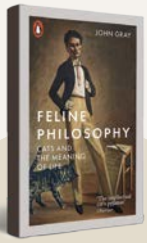
They provide peepholes into the intimate lives of urban, privileged and educated pet owners talking about the love that goes beyond family, property, reason. The great majority of the narrators are Indians whose lives have been fundamentally altered by the sometimes absurd but often unbearable sweetness that takes the shape of furry, four-footed creatures.

Though conceived of and published entirely separately, the books might as well be companion volumes. A couple of writers appear in both. They contain illustrations and photographs but they're not aimed at children. They're handsome and well-designed but both contain small fleas in the form of proofing errors. It's not possible to say which book is better than the other, any more than it's possible to say which is better, cat or dog.

Cat People (*CAT*) includes pieces of narrative

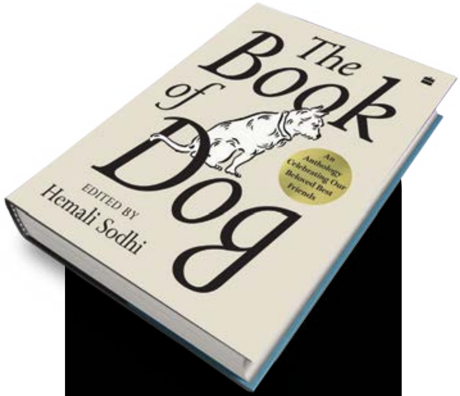
Chasing their Tale

Best new beastly books



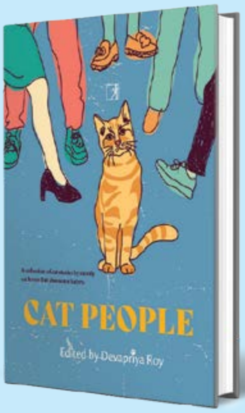
FELINE PHILOSOPHY
Cats and the Meaning of Life
by John Gray
PENGUIN
₹699; 128 pages

Michel de Montaigne had asked, "When I play with my cat, how do I know she is not passing time with me rather than I with her?" Gray tries to answer this and other cat-related philosophical queries here.



THE BOOK OF DOG
edited by Hemali Sodhi
HARPERCOLLINS
₹699; 336 pages

CAT PEOPLE
edited by Devapriya Roy
SIMON & SCHUSTER INDIA
₹499; 295 pages



fiction while *The Book of Dog* (*DOG*) is almost entirely first-person documentary. In both books, there are many instances of aliases and initials being used in the place of complete names. Perhaps a sign of the number of famous people who appear at centre-stage or in the wings?

There are more stories in *DOG*, but most are only a few pages long. *CAT* has fewer but longer pieces and the love described within them is both more piercing and mysterious. As Vangmayi Parakala tells us in her self-reflective story 'Seventy Per Cent Cat', the Mahabharata records Yudhistira's friendship with a dog, but there are no references to cat-human companionships in either of the major myth-cycles. There's an image of a cat in yogic pose, she writes, in the huge bas-relief called 'Bhageeratha's Penance' at Mahabalipuram, but its story is one of feline treachery.

Jai Arjun Singh's essay 'Through the Sands of Time' in *CAT* is exceptional, both in the way that it's told as well as for the many shades of pathos it contains. His piece 'Part-Time Dogs' provides an emotional hinge that connects both books. The place of non-humans is precarious even at the best of times, but, as he shows us in both his pieces, the pandemic was exceptionally harsh for street animals. The closing of roadside eateries in cities meant that the creatures who depended on them for handouts were left to die of starvation and thirst.

Unlike any similar tales of furry and bewhiskered companions in the industrialised world, the sagas of companion-creatures in India often include the shadowy presence of domestic 'helps': cooks, maids, *dhobis*, drivers, security guards and others. In these stories, where many of the non-humans are named and adored, these others are referred to only in passing, frequently unnamed and undescribed. In this sense, both books provide an unintended double narrative. The dominant one is about the much-beloved non-humans with their wet noses, wagging tails, hisses and purrs. The hidden one is about the many humans who attend upon those who write essays about their pets.

DOG contains more overtly humorous stories than *CAT*. My favourite is the very first one, by Ashok Ferrey, 'The Average Sri Lankan Family', concerning the gradual colonisation of a human home by canny canines. Many stories are deeply personal, involving tragedies and breakdowns. One that I liked for the way that it maintained narrative tension between the dogs and the author's nerves is 'Death, Dignity, Dogs'. Maneka Gandhi's 'Why Do We Go Looking for Children of the Heart?' is achingly sad. Both photo essays are wonderful—Divya Duggar's 'Chaos in a Coupe' and Sooni Taraporevala's 'The Dogs of Marine Drive'—leading one to hope that there will be many wonderful photo-albums to follow. ■

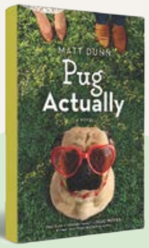
—Manjula Padmanabhan

THE STORIES ARE WRITTEN BY PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES HAVE BEEN FUNDAMENTALLY ALTERED BY THE SOMETIMES ABSURD BUT OFTEN UNBEARABLE SWEETNESS OF FURRY, FOUR-FOOTED CREATURES

On Animals
Susan Orlean

ON ANIMALS
by Susan Orlean
ATLANTIC BOOKS
₹699; 256 pages

Always generous and sometimes humorous, Susan Orlean's essays focus on the birds and mammals–turkeys, cattle, chickens, dogs–that have been residents and guests at her farm in upstate New York.



PUG ACTUALLY
by Matt Dunn
MIRA BOOKS
₹550; 320 pages

Narrated by Doug, a loyal rescue pug, this hilarious novel offers laughs and comfort in equal measure. Though confounded by human relationships, Doug tries hard to bring together his owner and his vet.

SPORTS

THE CYCLISTS MOVING MOUNTAINS

INDIA'S MOUNTAIN BIKERS ARE NOW GETTING THE PUSH THEY NEEDED TO SUCCEED ON THE WORLD STAGE

17th National MTB Cycling Championship Gadag-2021
START
112
272
26
262

In 2012, Shiven entered his first mountain biking race in Shimla. Though he finished third, he was disqualified for not wearing a helmet. It was a harsh lesson for Shiven, a teenager at the time, but it only strengthened his resolve. Wanting to explore his options as a professional cyclist, he moved to Manali four years ago. He also started working with a sports scientist in South Africa. His lone, single-minded battle has paid off. Shiven, 24, is today the reigning MTB (mountain biking) national champion and one of India's top cyclists. "It was an individual effort, but a lot has happened for the sport in the recent past," he says.

With mountain biking now a feature at the Asian Games and the Olympics, the CFI is doubling its efforts

In July 2019, the Cycling Federation of India (CFI) sent the first Indian team to compete at the Asian Mountain Bike (MTB) Championships in Lebanon. A month-long camp was organised in Haldwani before the event—another first for mountain biking. It was a push in the right direction for athletes like Shiven, who had, until then, often put together their own resources to continue training and competing. With mountain biking now a feature at the Asian Games and the Olympics, the CFI can be seen doubling its efforts. For instance, the federation has now decided to send a team of seven riders to Turkey, where they'll train and race alongside some of the top mountain bikers in the world.

"It's the first time we are being sent on an exposure tour. The focus is not on results—it's about learning. It will help us as we target podium finishes at the Asian Games and Asian Championships," says Shiven. Back home, the CFI is trying to replicate the success they have had with track cycling, especially after they set up the National Cycling Academy in New Delhi in 2015. By April, they hope to get a mountain biking academy up and running at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) facility in Shilaroo, Himachal Pradesh. "We've identified the cyclists. A few had gone to the SAI centre in Patiala, but their visit was cut short due to Covid," says V.N. Singh, assistant secretary at CFI.

These developments have encouraged young riders like Kariksing Adonis Tangpu to pursue mountain biking full-time. Over the past year, he has worked remotely with a strength and conditioning coach, a nutritionist and an SAI psychologist. He shifted base from Mysuru to Imphal after receiving support from the Manipur Adventure and Mountain Biking Association (MAMBA). He has also found three private sponsors. "I could pursue the sport during my younger days thanks to my family's support, but things have really improved. There's a lot of learning ahead," says 19-year-old Tangpu. ■

—Shail Desai

RIDING UP A STORM

CYCLING EVENTS TO PREPARE FOR

CYCLE TOUR OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

March 13 - March 19

(nnejourneys.com)

This cycle tour of Arunachal Pradesh will take you to the point where three of India's easternmost tributaries come together to form the Brahmaputra. That, though, in no way, is the only watershed moment on offer here. There are also vistas to see, tribes to meet and family-run eco-lodges to stay in.

•

AAMCHI MUMBAI CYCLOTHON 2022

March 27

(aamchimumbaicyclothon.com)

One of the first such events to be organised in the city, this 'cyclothon' aims to promote eco-friendly transport options, thereby helping create awareness about sustainable living among Mumbaikars.

•

MANALI-LEH + KHARDUNGLA CYCLING EXPEDITION

July 9 - July 19

(dare2gear.com)

Just reading the 11-day itinerary of this cycling expedition is a treat in itself. The journey from Manali to Khardungla has the most awe-inspiring pit stops–Keylong, Sarchu, Pang, Lato, and, of course, Leh.

SPORTS

The Bikepacker's Guide to the Galaxy

Bikepacking isn't easy, but several Indians are taking to it in an effort to discover the world and themselves

A year ago, Shriram Kondhawekar, 50, and Milind Tambe, 56, got together to plan their annual adventure. Most times, they preferred going on a Himalayan trek, but this time, they wanted to hit the open road and cycle along India's coastline. As they began to research, they realised just what they were up against—the distance added up to 6,800 km, with a total elevation gain of around 24,000 metres, which would take them 101 days in all to pedal. They would be riding self-supported, which meant carrying all the essential gear on their bicycles. "I last rode a bicycle during my college days. But Milind's idea was unique and I had enough self-belief that I could pull it off," says Kondhawekar.

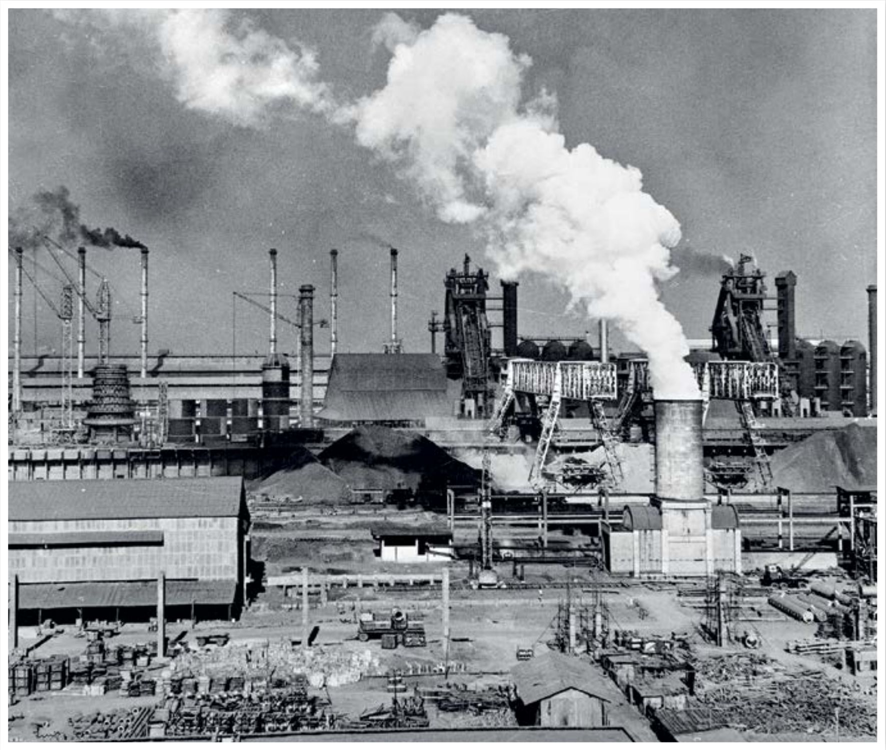
Bikepacking or bicycle touring has increasingly become a popular mode of travel and exploration. At the heart of it is the joy of making unhurried progress each day. A photographer by profession, Navin Paul, for instance, wanted to travel at a pace that would allow him to capture the diverse landscape of India. His plan to live on the road for two years meant he had a tight daily budget of only Rs 300. He stayed in gurudwaras, cooked his own food, camped wherever possible, banking on the generosity of people on the road. "In Murudeshwar, I was approached by a fisherman. He warned me of robberies in the area and didn't let me camp on the beach. I slept in his small hut where he fed me fresh fish. It was a touching gesture from a complete stranger," Paul says.

AT THE HEART OF BIKEPACKING IS THE JOY OF MAKING UNHURRIED PROGRESS EACH DAY, TAKING IN THE SIGHTS AT LEISURE

As a female cyclist, Vedangi Kulkarni faced a few challenges when she started a solo attempt to circumnavigate the world in 2018. "I had to deal with my periods on the go. I was unconsciously hiding my hair and looking out for anybody 'dangerous'," she says. The modest bicycle, in the end, mainly helped Kulkarni, now 22, befriend many a stranger. While looking for shelter during a thunderstorm in Elkhorn, US, she was hosted by a family, who even rode a short distance alongside her the next day. "The ride taught me that people are mostly good at heart and it's important that I see the good in them before the bad," Kulkarni says. ■

–Shail Desai

SPINNING WHEELS
Vedangi Kulkarni (top); and Navin Paul



RINGSIDE VIEW (from left) 'Bhilai Steel Works'; 'Untitled'; and (bottom) 'Men on a riffing of a Swedish ship', by Sunil Janah

PHOTOGRAPHY

In the *Making*

AN EXHIBITION OF THE LATE **SUNIL JANAH'S** PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWS A NEWLY INDEPENDENT INDIA COMING BACK TO LIFE

BY THE TIME HE WAS 30, Sunil Janah (1918-2012) had already done the work for which he would be best remembered. In 1943, as a 25-year-old photography enthusiast, he was sent by Communist leader P.C. Joshi to document the famine ravaging Bengal's rural districts. Janah undertook most of these journeys in partnership with Chittaprosad, a painter and print-maker. Together, Janah and Chitto created an incredible and indelible visual record of mass tragedy and struggle.

Printed in Joshi's Communist newspaper *People's War*, Chittaprosad's drawings and etchings and Janah's stark photographs gave us images of a Bengal caught in the historic pincer between the end of a bloody Empire and the fallout of a global conflict.

By the time Independence came around, Janah had not only photographed the famine but also taken amazing, candid portraits of figures like Nehru, Gandhi and Jinnah. The photos included in the show *Making a Photograph* (on display at Kolkata's Experimenter Gallery till March 26) are 'portraits' of a completely different order. Today, as the Hindutva airbrush industry goes into over-drive trying to wipe out accurate memories of the first years of Independence, these gorgeous photographs (printed by Janah himself) give the lie to the absurd claim that 'nothing was done in the first 70 years of India's independence'.

> SUNIL JANAH'S PHOTOGRAPHS GIVE LIE TO THE ABSURD CLAIM THAT NOTHING WAS DONE IN THE FIRST 70 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

In these pictures, we see a shattered, eviscerated country energetically beginning to put itself together, attempting courageously to engage with the remaining half of the 20th century. Through these photos of human labour surrounded by engineered metal and furnace smoke we see coming up the steel mills and the foundries, the jute factories, the new railways and the dams; in the factory-scapes and construction panoramas we see what Nehru meant by the 'temples of modern India', driven by the science and rationality of the day. Rourkela, Bhilai, Damodar Valley Corporation, names we now take for granted in India's industrial anatomy, were things that had to be wrought out of the sorry wasteland left behind by the British.

Janah was an avid student of the work being done by the masters in the West, such as the great landscapist Ansel Adams. His involvement with the Communist Party also exposed him to the photo work from the recently formed Soviet Union, where Stalin's five-year plans were depicted in 'heroic' and 'monumental' framings in cinema and photography. During World War II, Janah became friends with possibly the most famous photographer in the world at the time—American photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White. She sought out Janah to help her with her assignments in India for *Life Magazine*; in return, she supported Janah's work. Ansel Adams articulated the difference between *taking* a photograph—often seen as the capturing of an instant—and *making* a photograph—where the photographer works consciously towards arriving at an image before and around the brief moment of exposure. In Janah's frames of factories and industrial processes from the first two decades of Independence, we can see the distillation of all these influences as he makes the images of the making of a new India. ■

–Ruchir Joshi

ART

KILLING HIS DARLINGS

Artist **Sudhir Patwardhan's** new body of work riffs on the opposing forces of creation and destruction

Sudhir Patwardhan has built a career painting things as he saw them—the harsh realities of the undercity, the faceless crowd, Mumbai's proletariat. "Sudhir is an artist who's trying not to be decorative or unnecessarily intellectual. His work is narrative. He tells a story he knows best. The great thing about Sudhir is that he has stuck to his artistic preoccupations, without ever bothering about what particular style is in vogue," says Arun Vadehra, whose Vadehra Art Gallery in New Delhi is currently hosting a show of Patwardhan's latest body of work.

Rendered with an eye both observant and realistic, *Portraits of an Existential Artist* (on display until February 23) finds Patwardhan turning his gaze inwards. Over the past decade, two important life events—quitting his long-held job as a radiologist in 2005, and becoming a grandfather in 2008—have marked a shift in the tone of his paintings. With the action having shifted from the street to the studio, we have witnessed the artist's contemplative mind at work, seen his private anxieties and demons. After the pandemic struck, Patwardhan, now 73, hardly ventured out. "At first, the lockdown felt good because, legally, you couldn't go out anywhere," Patwardhan says.

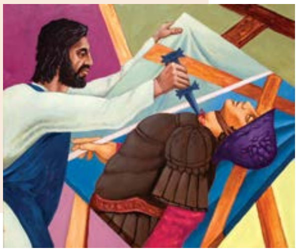
SUDHIR PATWARDHAN'S Portraits of an Existential Artist gives the maxim 'suffering for art' a new resonance

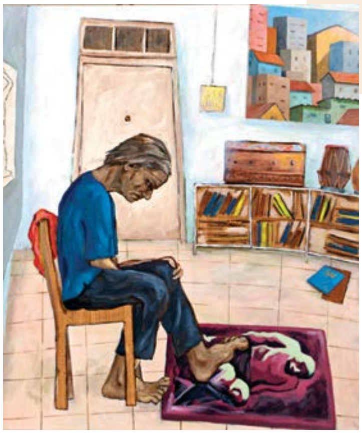
"Strangely, even though I had all the time in the world, the work turned out to be a little melancholic."

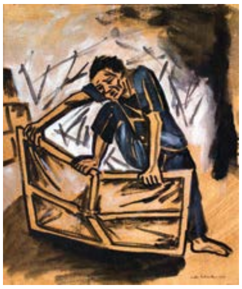
Unveiled at Art Basel OVR 2022 earlier this month, *Portraits of an Existential Artist* seems to give the maxim 'suffering for art' a new resonance. Partly inspired by Hindu philosophy, Patwardhan riffs on the process of creation and destruction and returns once again to the subject of violence. Unlike his depictions of the Bombay riots and railway accidents, this time, the theme feels at once personal and universal—an artist destroying his own work. It is a more "metaphorical reaction than [it is] autobiographical", he insists.

A strong advocate of free speech and a tireless critic of sectarianism and religious violence, Patwardhan's art always had what he calls a "political angle." He says he finds a curious dichotomy in the aestheticisation of violence: "When we go to museums, we find swords and daggers engraved with diamonds and precious stones. Though they are lethal objects used for killing, we can't get enough of their beauty. I want to better understand this contradiction." ■

–Shaikh Ayaz







AS HE SEES IT (clockwise from left) 'Assault'; 'War I'; 'Break'; and (centre) Sudhir Patwardhan

PTI

HER LAST RALLY

Having recently announced that this will be her last season on tour, tennis star **SANIA MIRZA** has shown that it is always best to call it a day when the going is good

Q. What prompted your announcement to retire at the end of the season?
It wasn't something that was really planned. I have been thinking about it for the past few months. I have been struggling a bit with my body, also mentally. In hindsight, though, I feel like I have made so many people sad because I am now constantly being asked about retirement after every match.

Q. Who has been your favourite doubles/ mixed doubles partner and why?
I'm going to have to say it was Martina (Hingis). We had a lot of fun on and off the court, created some special memories and some very special records. In mixed, I think it's Mahesh (Bhupathi), because we were the first Indian woman and man to win a Grand Slam together. We are very close friends and that made it even more special.

Q. The French Open title is missing from your tally when it comes to doubles and Wimbledon in the mixed doubles...
I think I'm all in for the next one year and I look forward to winning as much as I can. I feel like I'm a contender every time I play. If it happens, it will be really amazing. But I'm sure even if I pull it off, I'll always have something else I want to achieve. That's just the way an athlete's mentality goes.

Q. What would you tell a little girl who dreams of playing at the Grand Slams and Olympics?
'Don't let anybody tell you that you can't do it'. When we are young, we don't choose the profession we want because of society's norms. When we become older, we are expected to get married, have kids. These norms mean nothing. So, what I want to say to that little girl is, 'Back yourself so much that you don't need anyone else to back you'.

–with Shail Desai

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MOOD OF THE NATION POLL
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A WHOLE NEW LOOK

HOW TO BOLDLY TRANSFORM YOUR INTERIORS

IN CONVERSATION

WITH CELEBRITY DESIGNER RAVI VAZIRANI

TWICE AS NICE

ARCHITECT ASHIESH SHAH AND RITU KUMAR'S NEW COLLABORATION

Designer Tejal Mathur takes us inside musician Pratichee Mohapatra's Mumbai-residence

INDIA TODAY

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9:41
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Narendra Modi Live: By Congress-mukt India we will fulfil Gandhi's dream

PM Narendra Modi was speaking in Lok Sabha

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Photograph by: PANKAJ ANAND; Photo courtesy: RAVI VAZIRANI DESIGN STUDIO

देश का नं. 1
हिंदी न्यूज़ ऐप

जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से,
कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

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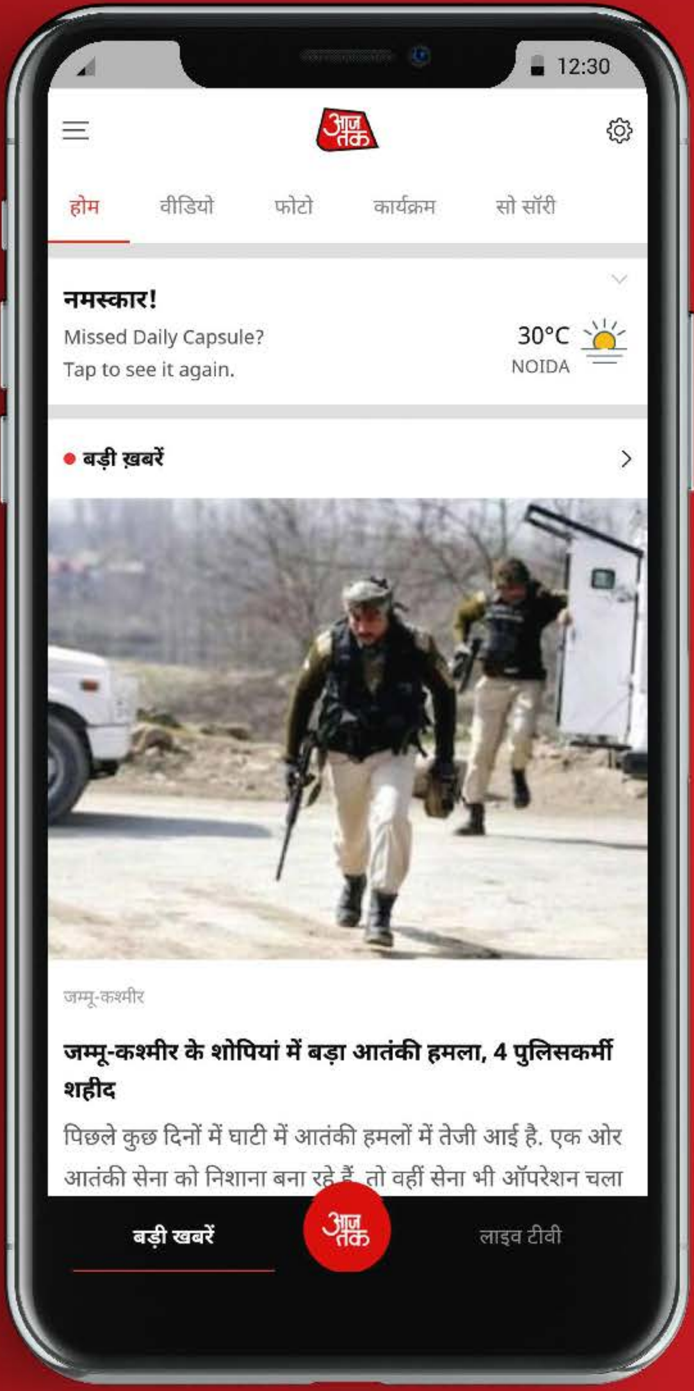
उपलब्ध है



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जम्मू-कश्मीर

जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

बड़ी खबरें लाइव टीवी

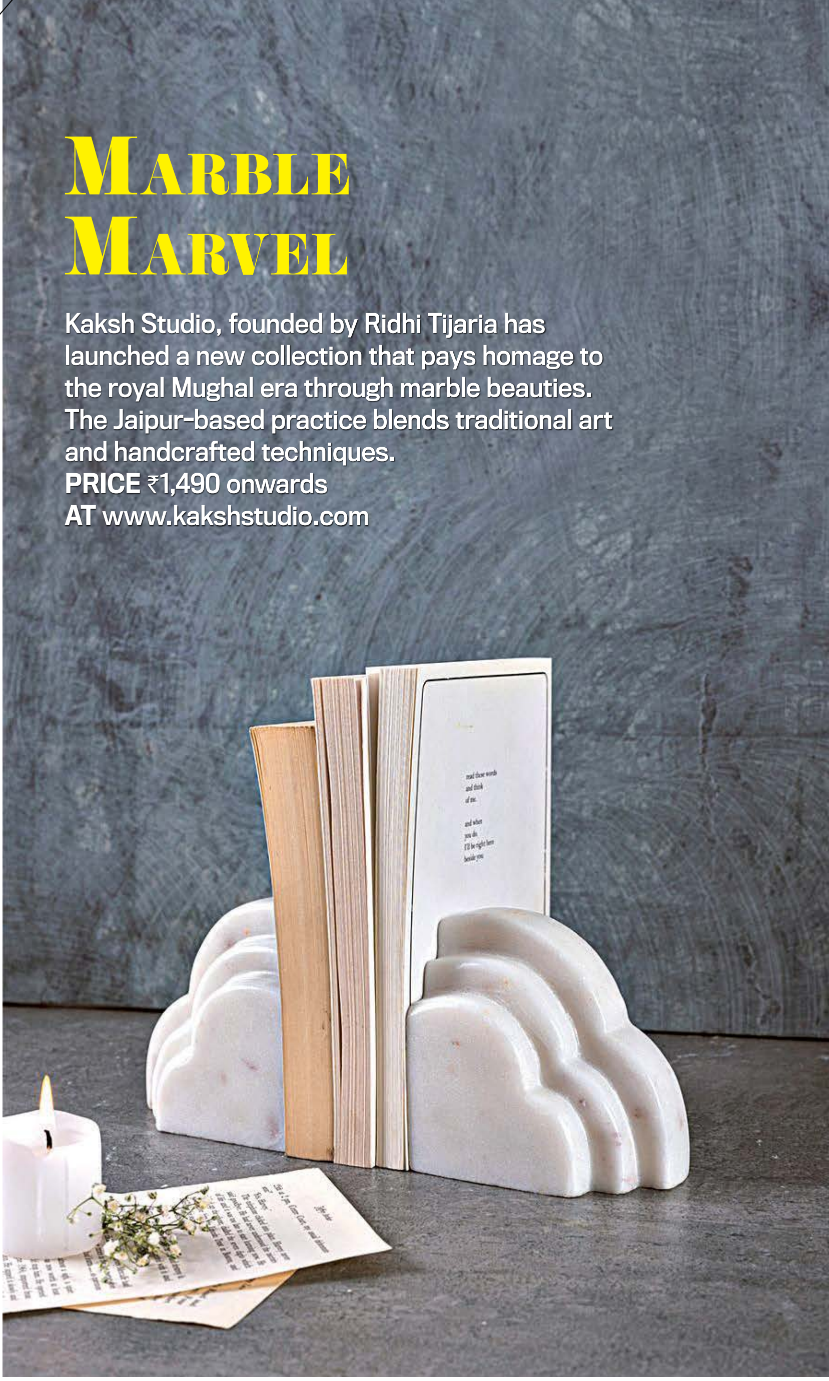
iSpy

Your guide to the hottest new stores and products

By **RIDHI KALE**

PITTER PLATTER

Giving serve ware a luxe-appeal, this geometric marble platter is from Serein Decor. It is handmade using natural stone and inlayed with brass finish.
PRICE ₹4,799
AT www.sereindecor.com



MARBLE MARVEL

Kaksh Studio, founded by Ridhi Tijaria has launched a new collection that pays homage to the royal Mughal era through marble beauties. The Jaipur-based practice blends traditional art and handcrafted techniques.
PRICE ₹1,490 onwards
AT www.kakshstudio.com

Sleep on This

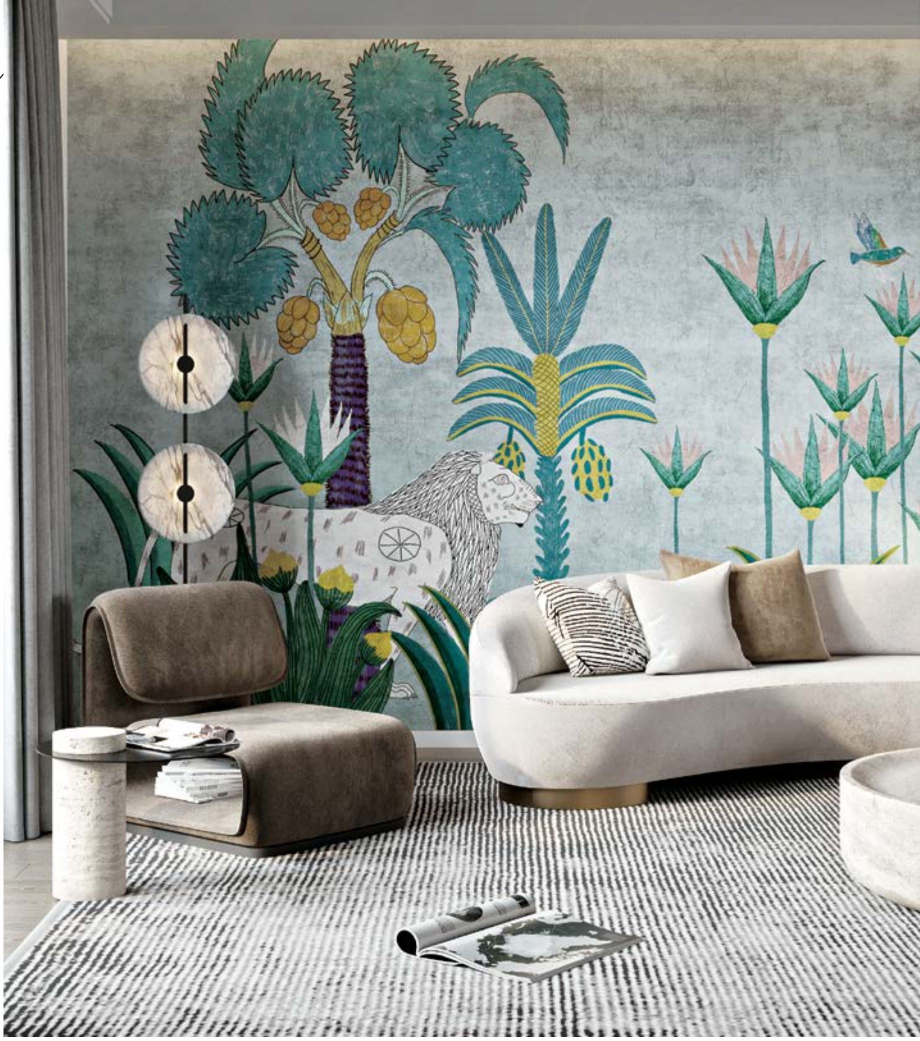
The Flynnter King Sleigh Bed with two storage drawers is part of the Flynnter Bedroom Collection by Ashley Furniture Homestore available at Dash Square. Made of wood, engineered wood and veneers, this beautiful bed ensures a good night's sleep.
PRICE ₹1,36,442
AT @AshleyFurnitureIndia (Instagram)

EYE CANDY

If it's luxury you seek then Beyond Dreams latest Versailles collection is what you need to get your hands on. From Curtains and cushions to upholstery, there is plenty to choose from.
PRICE on request
AT @beyondreams.in (Instagram)

TOP TABLE

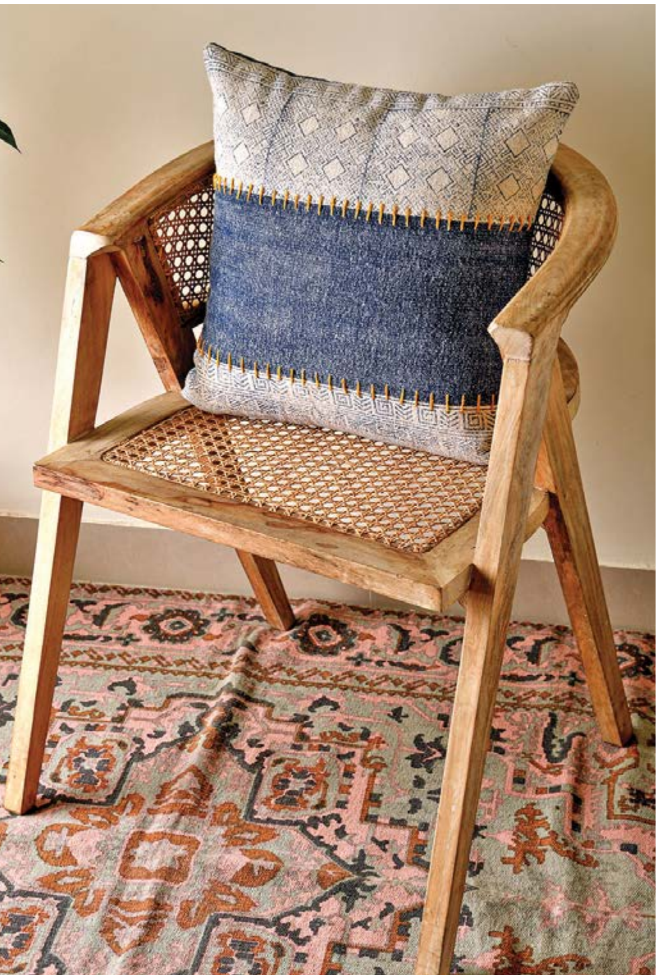
Functional, aesthetic and durable, Eris Home's new line of table linen makes everyday living easier. You will find crane and ginkgo motifs that are symbols of happiness and longevity in East Asian culture. The collection features table runners, placemats and napkins in rich pastel shades of green and blue.
PRICE ₹2,600 onwards
AT www.erishome.com



PAPER PUSHER

Let your walls do all the talking. UDC Homes has unveiled Egypt-inspired collection of wallpapers. As for motifs you will find palm and date trees as well as lilies and thematic-murals.

PRICE on request
AT @udchomes (Instagram)



BLOCK IT

GharGhar's newest offering, block print cushions are made using centuries old art form from Rajasthan. Made from cotton, intricate geometric patterns are blended to create an eye-catching look, and subtle trimmings of lace, threadwork and embroidery enhance their charm.

PRICE ₹1,100 to ₹1,300
AT www.gharghar.in

QUICK PICKS

Sage Living's new capsule collection of tables is called Forged. It has traditional craftsmanship with a modern and functional design language. The range comprises side tables, coffee tables and consoles.

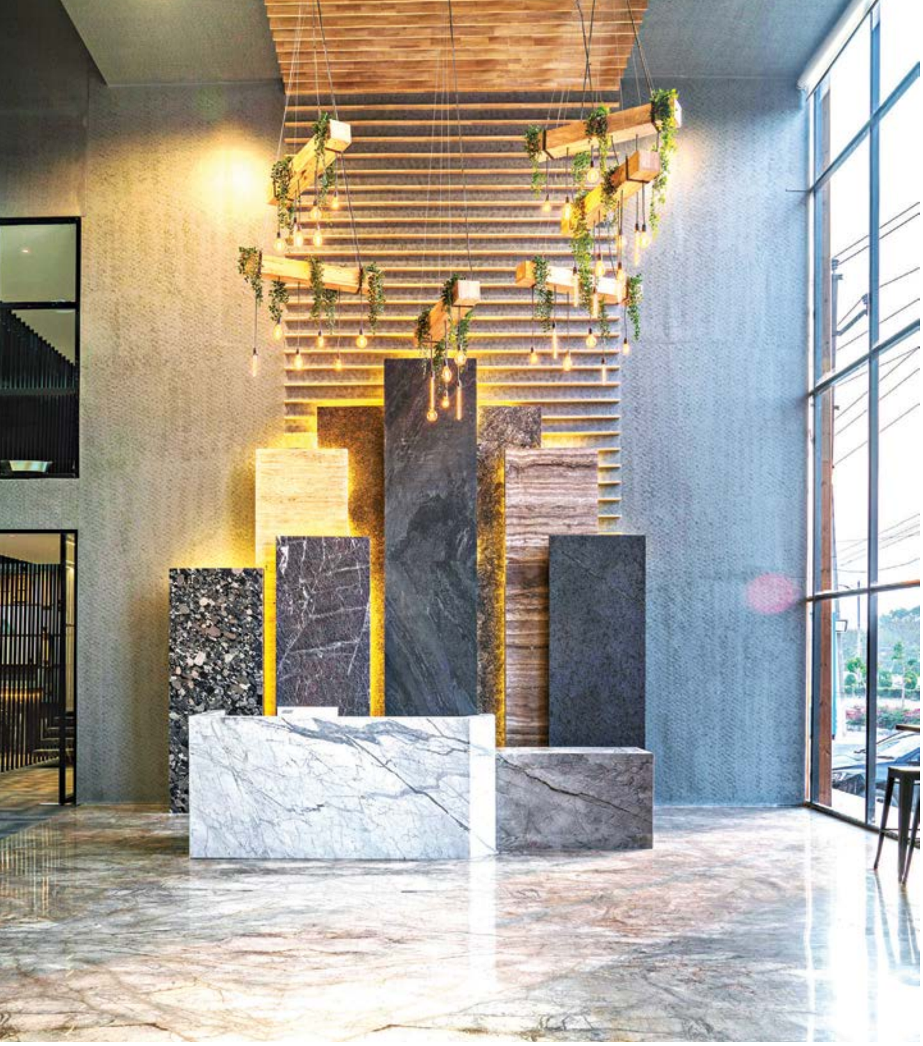
PRICE ₹37,100 onwards
AT www.sageliving.in

NIPPON NOOK

Orange Tree's latest range is an ode to Japanese minimal aesthetics. Titled Toshi Collection, cement, solid wood and metal legs with brass finish give each piece a unique look.
PRICE ₹8,550 onwards
AT www.orangetree.in

SERVE IN STYLE

This one will keep you knocking on wood. Why? WoodSoGood has launches a handcrafted range of platters and choppers that are perfect for the season. Made from wood, each piece has an eye-catching and unique design.
PRICE ₹499 onwards
AT www.woodsogoodshop.com



NEW STORE

M/S Navakar Granites & Marbles has launched N'Fabustone, a luxury conceptual studio that retails imported marble, semi-precious stones, granite, rare onyx and quartz. Their Spring Collection 2022 of high-end marbles is quite a sight to behold.
PRICE on request
AT @n_fabustone (Instagram)

CUSHION COMFORT

Nirmals Furnishings new ranges are perfect for modern homes. The Rochelle collection is made using woven engineered yarns with a colour palette ranging from pastels to bolder hues. While the Boudoir collection comprises exquisite velvet suede fabrics.
PRICE ₹2,430 per meter (Boudoir); ₹2,950 to ₹6,425 per meter (Rochelle)
AT www.nirmals.com

Gizmo GAGA

From the latest tech toys to reviews and views, this is all you need to know about appliances for your home

By **RIDHI KALE**

enviroglobe
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MOBILE TOWER
ELECTRICAL TRANSMISSION LINES
SERVER
USE FOR
CARS
HOTEL ROOMS

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PRICE ₹4,299

NEW RELEASE

The new range of De'Longhi Oil-Filled Radiators (OFR) come with dual thermostat and an additional fan heater for instant and powerful heating.
PRICE ₹17,790 onwards

TRIED AND TESTED

As someone who lives in Delhi, I've gone through my share of air purifiers of different sizes, filters, shapes and styles. Then I got a chance to try out the Dyson Purifier Hot+Cool. Even before switching it on, the futuristic shape had me sold. Add the fact that it can blow hot or cool air, and you know you have a winner. This one has a fully sealed HEPA 13 standard filtration. In lay terms it means that not only does the device ensure that no air bypasses the filter, but it blocks any potential leak points through which unclean air might enter the airflow. The company claims that this leads to removal of 99.95 per cent of particles as small as 0.1 microns such as allergens, bacteria, virus, pollen and mould spores. While the machine has been engineered to be 20 per cent quieter if you have the hot/cold fan on (it has 10 levels) there will be certain amount of noise. The swing mode allows you to clean the room air quicker, and it also gives you an option to direct the flow to one corner. It also has a remote control, auto mode (to maintain a preferred room temperature and air quality levels), voice control and night mode.
PRICE ₹45,900 and ₹55,900 (depending on the model)

Review
Design Amazing
User Friendly Very easy to use
Noise Level Fair
Verdict If money is not an issue, it's a great air purifier to purchase

DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK

Musician Pratichee Mohapatra and ad-filmmaker Anand Iyer's home in Mumbai uses deep, dreamy hues and a bold colour palette to create just the right amount of drama

By **TEJAL MATHUR**

This one's definitely not for the pastel hearted. Deep velvets in pink tourmalines against carbon dipped, pigmented walls to contrast the texture for drama, was my first instinct to dress up this sea-facing home for the artsy, no-holds barred couple, Pratichee Mohapatra and Anand Iyer. I find accent walls boring, instead an enveloping cocoon that pushes the palette to the extreme is edgy yet eye-catching. Luckily, Pratichee and Anand wanted to go with a full-bodied palette that tipped heavily on the deeper saturated side of the Pantone fandeck. Even though I had worked on their first home 14 years ago, this home held greater promise and got my head rush going.

The two most fun parts in the process were first culling out space for Pratichee's walk-in closet and the second was designing a bespoke wall shelving for Anand (an obsessive collector of record labels) in his

Photographs by: SEBASTIAN ZACHARIAH, PHX INDIA

DESIGNED WITH CARE
While art adds a strong punch of colour, the deep hues seep in from the living room to the bedroom to create a visual treat

lair, the media room. Probably the most indulgent space that had an entire wall lined with pro equipment (given his work as a filmmaker). The walls are soaked in deep tanzanite with a royal aubergine velvet couch that pops.

The dining and seating are centered in the squarish living room to face tall French windows that open out to a long deck. The dining back wall is smouldering anthracite with a sliver of gold piping and is flanked by the doorway and a floor-to-ceiling bar cabinet in black matted marble and slim ombré shutter folds. Fortunately, the lobby is private and even as you exit the elevator the tone is set as gold lettering on the walls that says Prana (a confluence of their names), welcomes you to what lies beyond. The leather finished terrazzo composite dining top is surrounded by skinny-soft blush 'stiletto' like chairs. The rest of the living walls take on a deep shade of a moonlit river interjected with a gilded cabinet below a fierce Basuki Dasgupta artwork.

I have a repertoire of working with handcrafted finishes and they loved the idea of me designing a coffee table as a block in a raw oak wood that we flame-torched to an umber brown and coated with oil for a textured open-grown finish much like the Japanese technique of wood preservation called 'Shou Sugi ban'. The centrepiece is aptly christened 'Charred for Life'. The scene-

SERGIO ARAGONES

DRAMA GALORE
(clockwise from left) The butterfly on the wall makes a bold statement in this nook; the bar cabinet; musician Pratichee Mohapatra in discussion with designer Tejal Mathur; the living room overlooks the dining table

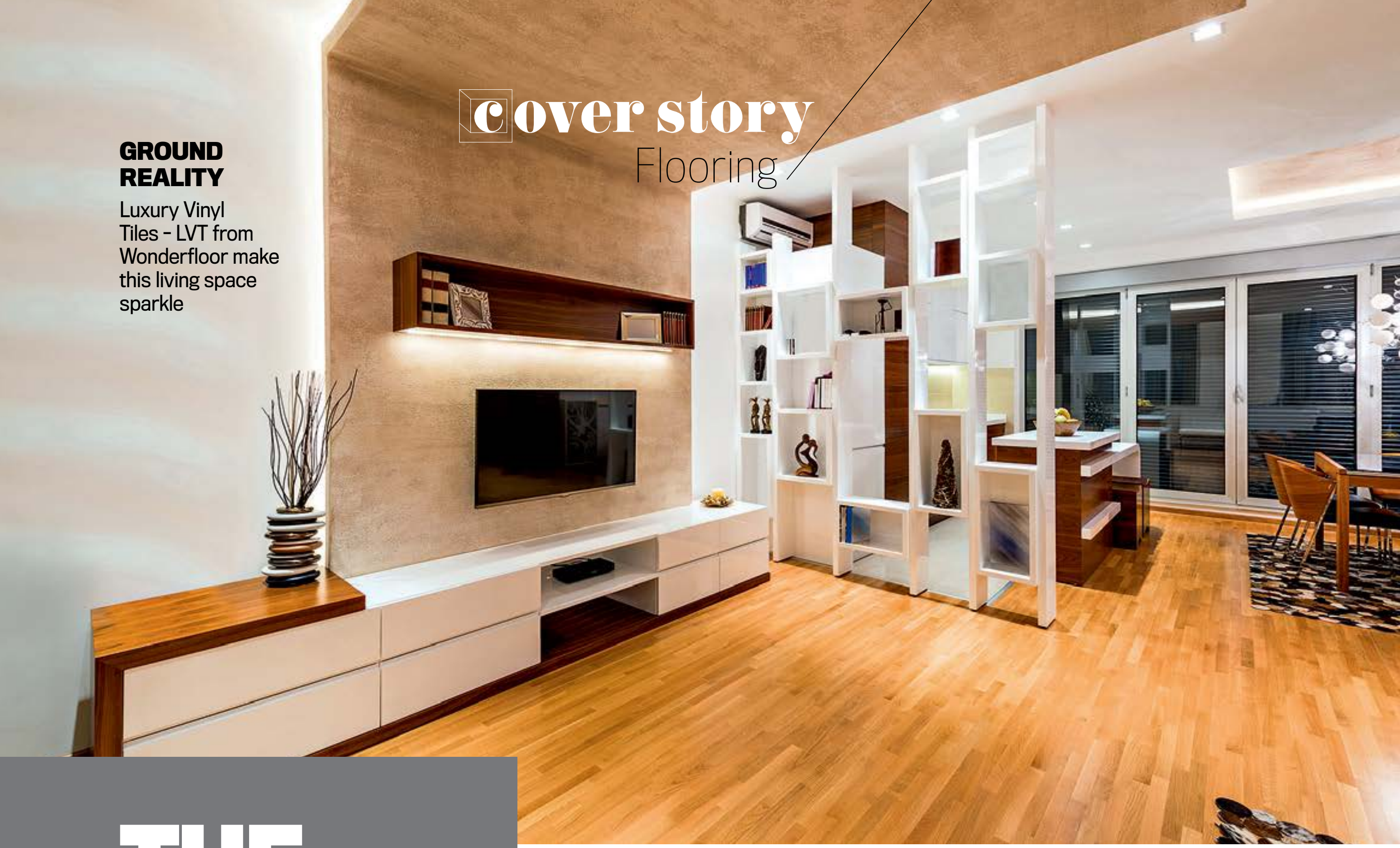
stealer in the room, however, is an overpowering winged wallpaper.

One of my favourite vantage views in the layered decor is where the hidden guest room door panel that opens into a deep raisin-coloured room which is lined with an opaque amethyst pastel on fluted wardrobes. The contrast between the masculinity of the living room wall in Pensive Prussian from Asian Paints and the boudoir brocade of the purples is rather startling and keeps drawing you back in.

There is no room for subtle in the master bedroom where I sampled out several shades to get the perfect dark teal like a reef in shadow on two walls to keep the colour warm enough. Naturally finished cement-fibre panels (I love the rawness of construction material) take on the only wall remaining and deftly conceal a door to the bathroom. While another slides to reveal Pratichee's whimsy wardrobe and shoes-a world in itself.

In this home there are endless possibilities of a bold expression that can be best described as maximal, seductive, and smoky-eyed. It makes me repeat with conviction, "don't be afraid of the dark".

Tejal Mathur established her Mumbai-based interior design practice, Tejal Mathur Design in 1998. In 2012, she also founded Ironworks, an esoteric line of furniture, accessories and linen.
www.tejalmathurdesign.in @tejalmathur (Instagram)



GROUND REALITY

Luxury Vinyl Tiles - LVT from Wonderfloor make this living space sparkle

THE FLOOR SHOW

The ground beneath your feet has become so much more than a surface to walk on, it's key in making your space stand out

By **ARVIND GOENKA**

There is a saying that good design starts the ground up. In today's time when the flooring has become the showstopper in a home, this maxim couldn't be more accurate. You can express and say just about anything with the right flooring. For formal and moody to whimsical and eco-chic—there is a world of possibilities to choose from.

This is a reason why we have launched an array of bold new products in the recent years. These state-of-the-art products were developed keeping in mind the international trends, designs, and product quality. Multi-purpose sports and fitness flooring, cushioned school flooring, heavy-duty flooring, anti-bacterial flooring, and wall cladding for healthcare, luxury vinyl tiles (LVT) and SPC floorings, are a few of the options to choose from. Here are some of the best ones.

Timberland LVT are the latest collection of PVC tiles and planks. The shades and designs are carefully chosen to complement the natural wood and stone finish. Timberland LVT's are designed to replicate hard surface flooring materials such as stone or wood. They look stunning.

Braavo is a premium sports flooring with cushion backing designed keeping in mind the modern-day requirement of a floor that is heavy duty but soft enough for a comfortable and jerk free workout in a gym, sports court, or a fitness/wellness centre.

Siggma is a specialised homogeneous flooring designed for the healthcare/pharma industry keeping in mind the heavy footfalls, trolley movements. The antimicrobial properties of Siggma provides long time protection against fungal andbacterial growth.

Robust is a heavy-duty, fully flexible marbled PVC floor covering of high quality. These floorings are suitable for use in offices, airconditioned factories, the healthcare industry, auditoriums, libraries, shops, showrooms, schools, and colleges.

Arvind Goenka is the managing director of RMG Polyvinyl Pvt Ltd www.wonderfloor.co.in

Photograph: SHUTTERSTOCK

HEARTH AND HOME

Here's how you can cook up more than a storm in a stylish, fresh kitchen with oodles of drama

By **ANAND BALDAWA**

Anand Baldawa is the CEO of ThinKitchen, a multi-brand kitchen goods company that encourages families to cook, eat and live a healthy and happy life. www.thinkitchen.in

Kitchen is one of our most used living spaces. While you may not think about it, your kitchen is a great place to add decorative yet functional elements like modern tools and accessories that bring in style, aesthetics and innovation while being mindful and responsible. Here are few quick ways to give the kitchen a facelift.

Keep it Clutter-Free The secret to a clutter-free kitchen is a space roller and pull-down shutters—they help you conceal what you need to keep out of sight.

Cool Tools Maximise utilitarian purchases by investing in tools that serve a function and an aesthetic. Get a big chopping block that's colourful or a knife set that looks appealing and leave them in a corner of the counter as decor elements.

Vase It There are always nooks in the kitchen we don't know what to do with. Consider adding drama to these corners with a bold vase. This gives you a healthy confluence of bold and chic while sticking to the kitchen theme.

Clear Cues There is always that see through glass cabinet in the kitchen that gives away the secrets. Use this space to add colour and drama by filling up your staples in clear glass storage jars.

Clever Lighting Accents of light always gives a space a glammed-up look and feel. Install some LED strips inside cabinets or over countertops to eliminate shadows and immediately make your kitchen look like it's gone through an upgrade.

Serve in Style Invest in some cool serve ware to give a luxe feel to the kitchen or the dining area. A colourful salad bowl can make a world of difference.

BOLD, BEAUTIFUL AND BLISSFUL

The bathroom is no longer that purely functional room in your home. It's where you can rest, relax, and rejuvenate. Here's what new in this space.

By **RIDHI KALE**

BATH BEAUTIES

Striking sanitary ware by Kohler (previous page); Duravit's D-neo range (left); shower from Fima Carlo Frattini (below)

It's time to experiment with colour, texture, and style. No, we are not talking about your new wardrobe but the bathroom. By the end of 2021 people became bored of the bland and practical interiors and wanted more. From minimal but impactful colour play and stylish fixtures to statement bathware and showers that help you relax, there's a lot to choose from. You can mix and match to achieve the desired look.

Contemporary Cues

Modern bathrooms which are straight-lined look fresh and inviting. A good example is Duravit that has introduced D-Neo bathroom range. The new range has straight-lines and geometric shapes giving a sleek look to the bath. It has been designed by Bertrand Lejoly (Antwerp-based industrial design practice) and has that element of fun that instantly elevates the space. Another good example of the geometric trend is Grohe's Cube Ceramics range. The collection has dynamic, architectural lines for a modern and glossy appeal. Equally alluring are Roca's range of washbasins and WCs whose interpretation of the geometric trend is accentuating the curve.

CLEAN AND CLEAR

(clockwise from left) American Standard Aerozen Shower Toilet; ROCA's Beyond range; GROHE's Cube Ceramics; Hansgrohe's Metropol collection

Take a Pot Shot

If there is one item that has transformed from a hole in the ground to it has to be the WC. Take for instance American Standard's Aerozen Shower Toilet. There is a dual nozzle with front and rear cleansing nozzles, posterior cleansing, feminine air bubble soft cleansing, heated seat, anti-bacterial protection, deodoriser, a remote control among other things.

Thin is In

Washbasins can make or mar the look of your bathroom. Kohler's new Modern Life Edge - Edge 600 Vessel is a case in point. The beautiful design almost elevates it to a work of art. It has a 40 per cent thinner edge (6mm) and comes with Germshield™ technology. This means that it is an an anti-microbial ceramic that provides protection against virus, bacteria, and other germs.

Tap That

Hansgrohe's Metropol taps feature a precise, geometric design. A variety of spout heights guarantee plenty of elbow room at the wash basin. You decide whether you would rather use the flat lever handle, the delicate bow-shaped handle or the minimalist handle featuring Select technology. The basin taps in the Select variant is controlled intuitively at the touch of a button.

Showering Ideas

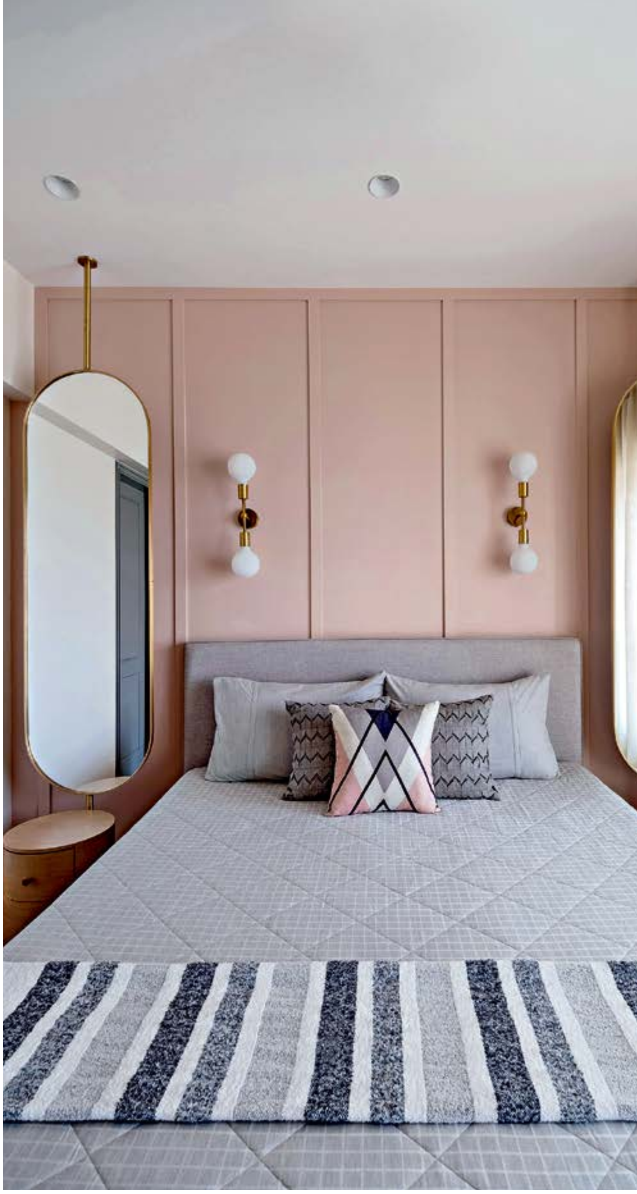
It's no secret the showers have become a thing of beauty. Their shape, numbers of nozzles and tech-driven features can bewitch anyone. From Kohler to FIMA Carlo Frattini pick one that metamorphoses the bath into a showstopper.

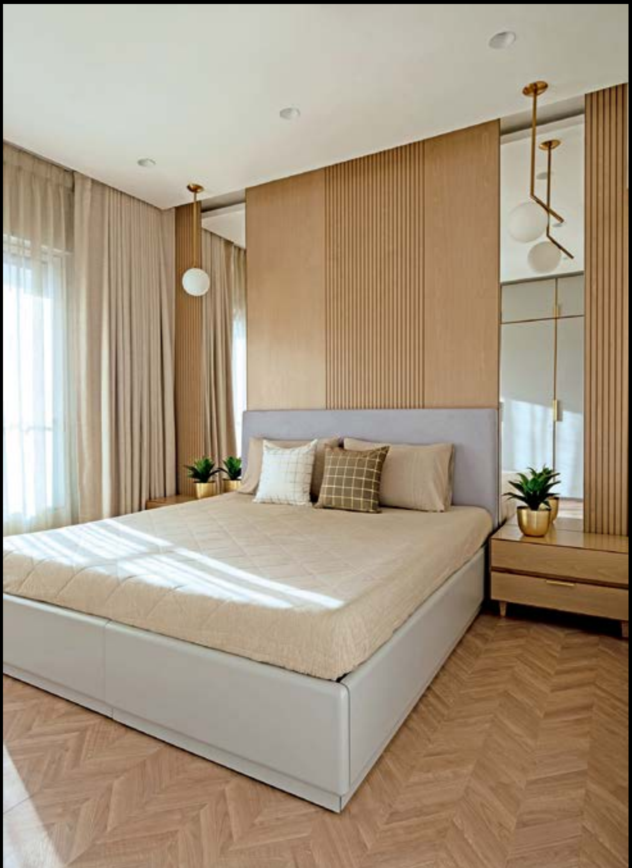
SLEEPING BEAUTY

Transform your bedroom into a statement space with these quick tips, tricks, and ideas

By **DISHA BHAVSAR AND SHIVANI AJMERA**

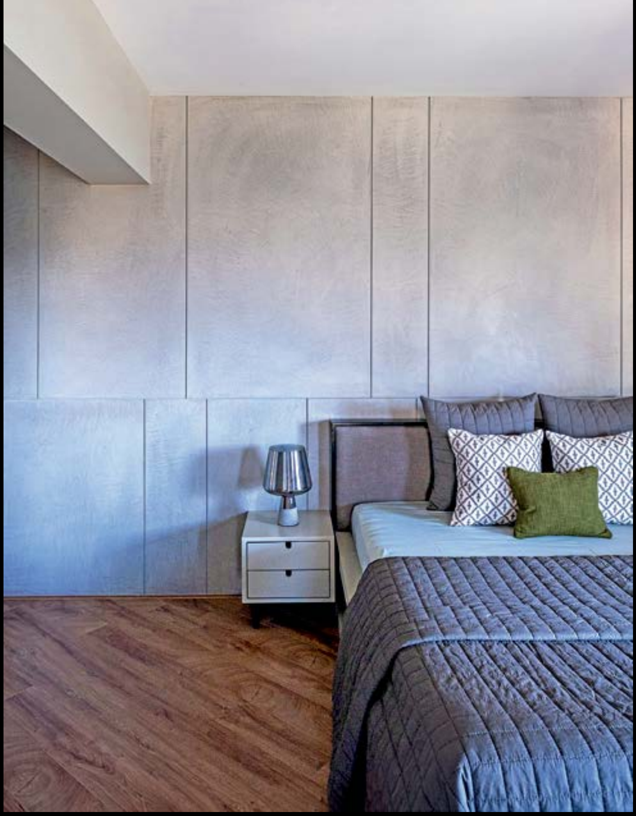
A bedroom is a personal sanctuary, where one goes after a tiring day, seeking solace and relaxation. After having made our bedrooms into makeshift offices and yoga studios, the space is bound to feel monotonous. Looking to transform the bedroom into a bold statement space? Here are some ways to grant it a refreshed aesthetic.

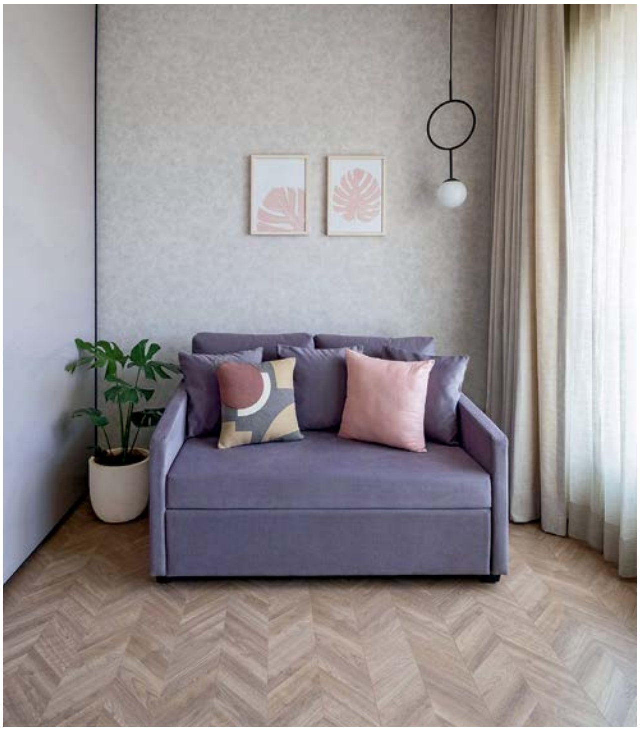




1. The **colour palette** plays a crucial role in determining the vibe of any space. Since the primary purpose of the bedroom is unwinding, the overall palette should be calming like the soft pastel palette of the daughter's room in the Fluid home- where the upholstery, the bedcovers and cushions are used in contrast to the wall panelling. Metallic accents in gold add the bold factor.

2. **Wall panelling**, especially behind the bed, is one of the most popular ways to draw attention. With many material options available in varied textures, there is no limitation to the visual styles that can be explored. For the daughter's bedroom in the Fluid Home, the wall panel in a natural wooden tone, detailed with vertical flutings, is accentuated with the use of mirrors that make a statement despite being muted.

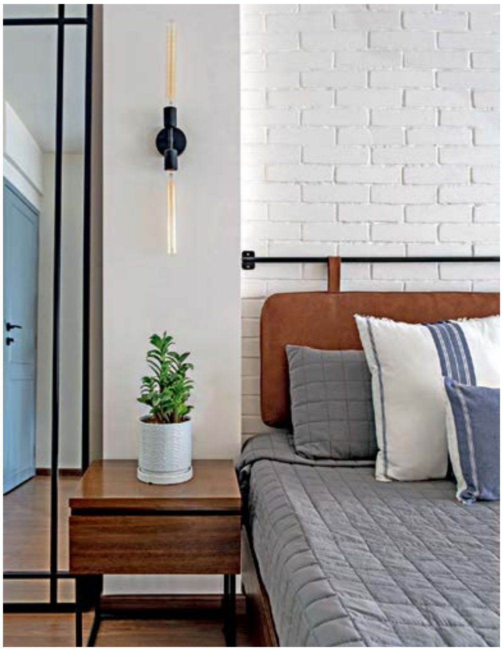




3. Art is an excellent form of self-expression, primarily when used inside a bedroom. It could be a wall mural, a sculpture, images or photographs strategically placed to add personalisation to the bedroom. In Fluid Home, a pair of framed prints in a botanical motif set over textured wallpaper is subtle yet draws attention, layering up to form a personality for the space.

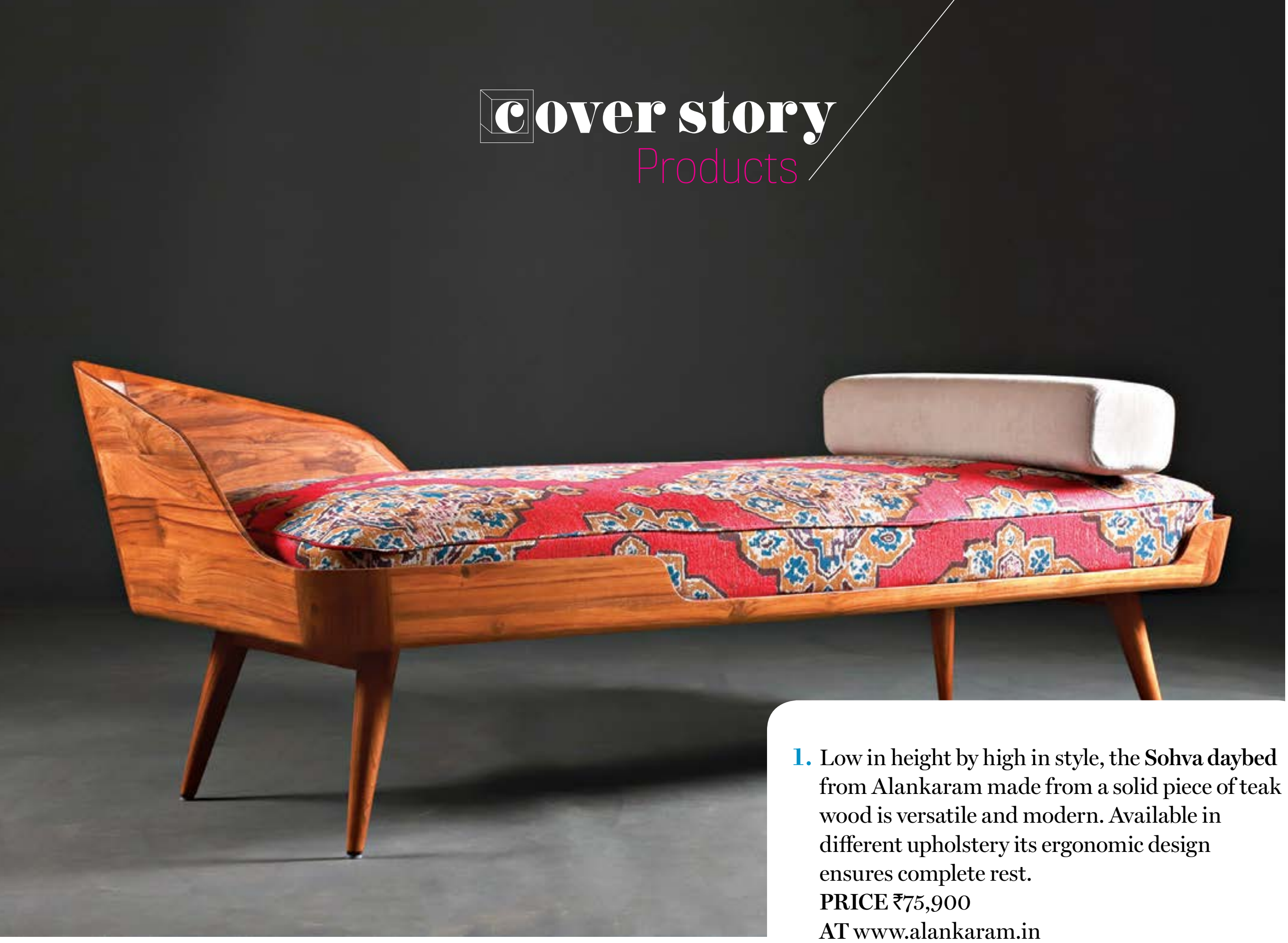
Photographs by: KUBER SHAH

4. The **flooring** material is a large proportion of the visual frame in a bedroom and plays a crucial role in the overall aesthetics. It certainly does not have to be mundane or monotonous as there are a wide variety of materials, prints and textures at our disposals that can create impactful setups. For instance, the bedroom in Jardin home adorns a wooden flooring laid diagonally, defining how the laying style also adds character to the flooring material.



5. Headboards are important functional elements with numerous design possibilities and can undoubtedly make a bold statement. It can be an upholstered segment cushioned to the wall panelling, a part of the bed's design or a standalone element like in this bedroom from comedian Rohan Joshi'sresidence.

Disha Bhavsar and Shivani Ajmera are the principal designers and co-founders of Mumbai-based Quirk Studio www.quirkstudio.in

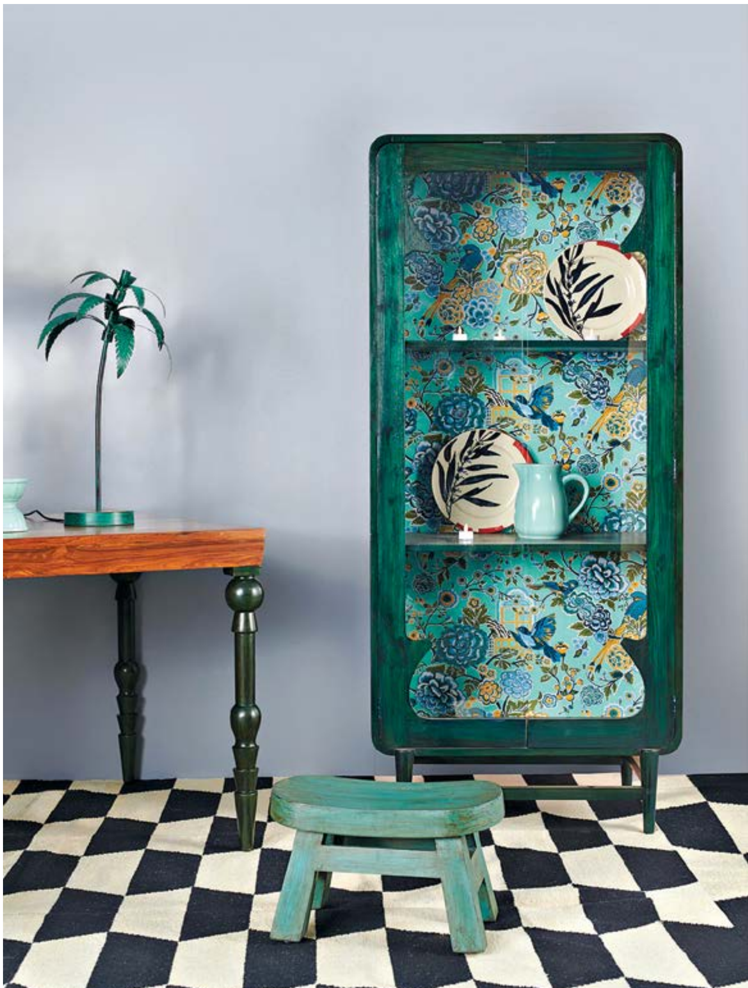


1. Low in height by high in style, the **Sohva daybed** from Alankaram made from a solid piece of teak wood is versatile and modern. Available in different upholstery its ergonomic design ensures complete rest.
PRICE ₹75,900
AT www.alankaram.in

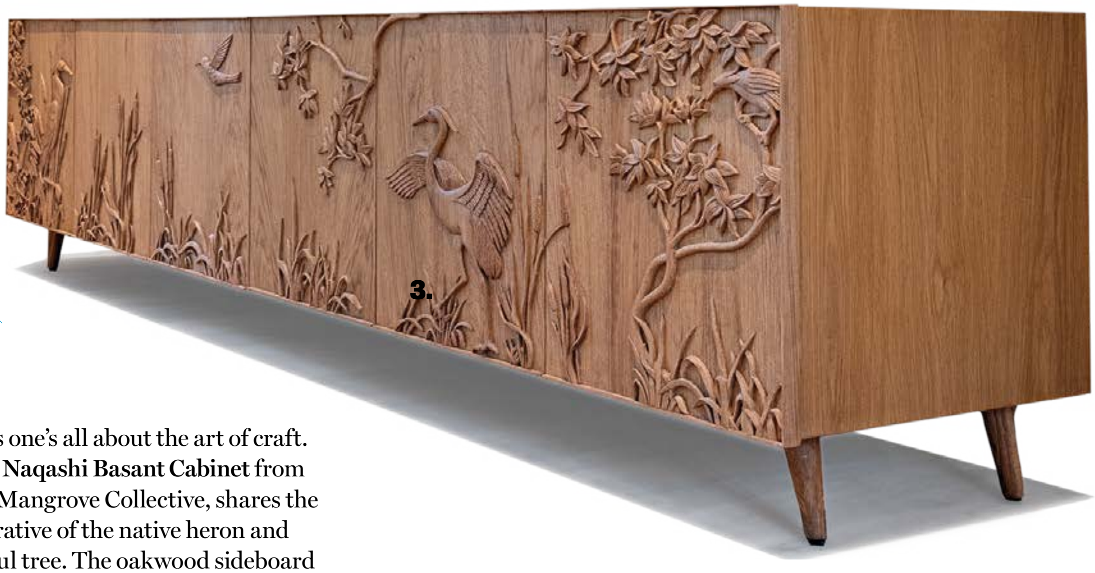
SINGULAR STYLE

Can a chair or a cabinet change the look of a room? These five furniture pieces that command attention, certainly do.

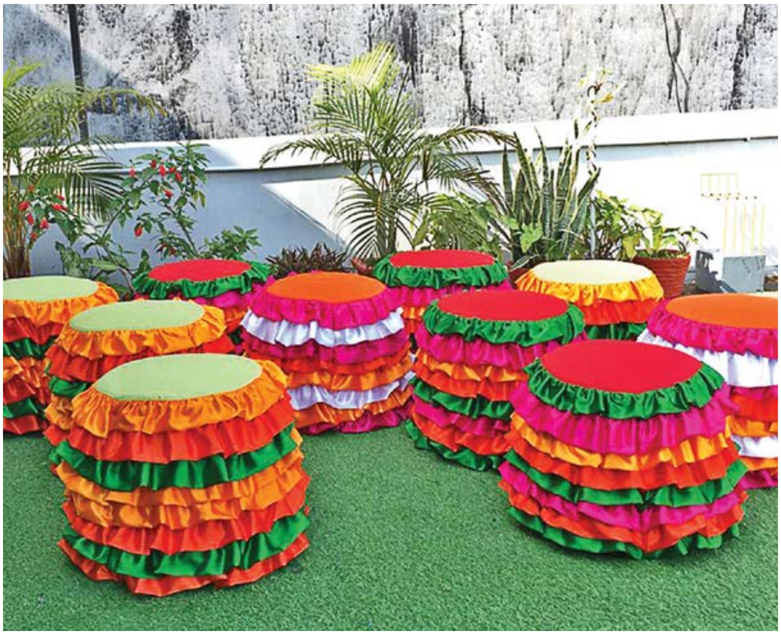
By **RIDHI KALE**



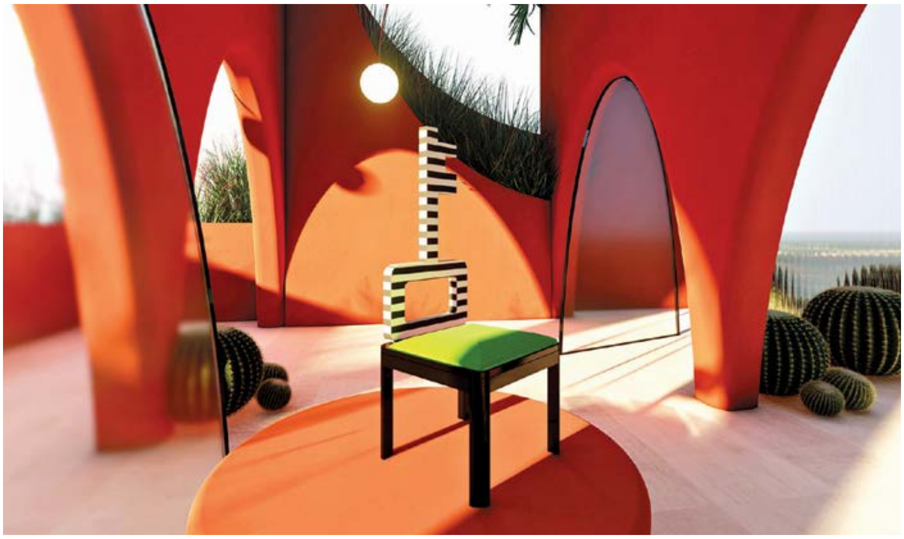
2. The **Damask Roz Cabinet** from Freedom Tree has a natural teak wood with a deep teal finish paired with Damask Rose print in sparkling aqua. The botanical backdrop looks truly spectacular.
PRICE ₹74,800; **AT** www.freedomtree.in



3. This one's all about the art of craft. The **Naqashi Basant Cabinet** from the Mangrove Collective, shares the narrative of the native heron and bakul tree. The oakwood sideboard is crafted by Naqashi craftsmen and each panel is carved with an independent set of motifs.
PRICE on request
AT www.mangrovecollective.in



4. The **Rangeela Stool** from Design Clinic India is inspired by the floral festival of Telangana, Bathukamma. Furniture designer Parth Parikh was fascinated by the beautiful flower arrangement and replicated that feeling on this stool. **PRICE** ₹8,000
AT @designclinicindia (Instagram)



5. This one might just be the key to standout interiors. The Lock and Key Chairs from Sanjyt Syngh are made of wood and stone. The black and white palette creates a stunning visual and the pop of green only adds to the drama. It is part of a limited-edition series by the designer.
PRICE on request
AT www.sanjytsyngh.com

TWICE AS NICE

What happens when two of the biggest names in design come together? You get pure visual opulence that uses rich materials, intricate detailing, and travel-inspiration.

By **RIDHI KALE**

SPOILT FOR CHOICE

Looking for bold neutrals then pick up this bedding is from the Jaisalmer Collection (inset); the dining range is from the Cochin Collection (left)

We were first introduced to Ritu Kumar's home line, a little over two years ago. It was love at first sight. From the complexly embroidered cushion covers to the stylish tableware, the collection was a feast for the eyes with a smorgasbord of artisanal inspiration from across the subcontinent. The brand's latest collaboration with celebrity architect and designer Ashiesh Shah continues this legacy. This time the design narrative travels to the cities of Amer, Jaisalmer, and Kochi. If beige, brown and maroons define, Jaisalmer's dunes-inspired Desert range, Amer's architecture and royalty give form and definition to the Chandbagh line. While the Cochin collection wrapped in tones of green and gold takes its cues from Kochi's lush vistas. We caught up with Shah (AS) and Amrish Kumar (AK), director and creative director, Ritu Kumar to know more.

Why did you choose Ashiesh Shah for this collaboration?

(**AK**) Ashiesh is well known for his modern interpretation of indigenous aesthetic and art form. He has drawn inspiration from different regions and designed a collection which captures the essential cultural, aesthetic and mood of the place. The collection is familiar and rooted while being forward looking and clean.

Tell us about the collaboration?

(**AS**) This journey began in Ritu Kumar's studio where I took a fair while to study their archives along with their earlier collections. Reading her books and browsing through her work helped gain insights into her refined perception of India and overarching aesthetic. Supplemented with a bank of information, we began our journey in an attempt to understand the world of Ritu Kumar first to layer it by infusing our thought process at the atelier for a seamlessly synchronised pairing. Inspired by traditional Indian fashion, the collections celebrate the rich cultural and architectural diversity with a contemporary flair serving as a platform for textile and design to seamlessly blend into one another.

How do the designs represent Atelier Ashiesh Shah's aesthetic?

(AS) The collection reflects an extension of the in-depth conversations and exchanges between the two adapting to a generation old practice of fashion with Atelier Ashiesh Shah infusing its flavour and language. The represents a fusion of the two, a result of finding nuances in textiles within the Indian ethos and creating a new language. In fact, this collection is a result of thorough research and brainstorming done around two years.

What's on offer?

(AK) Featuring a wide range of bed linen, wallpapers, tableware, and home décor, the collection translates the design, tonal and textural characteristics of each of these cities into a versatile and modern selection of pieces to infuse any space with a sophisticated warmth. Inspired by travel and the country's diverse heritage, each element in the new collection perfectly displays a minimal aesthetic with simplistic details and a hint of texture.

Any styling tips?

(AS) The fluidity of the collection enables it to be mixed and matched with existing design objects. They could work well as individual accents or in groups. The collection spews forth a sense of versatility and timelessness very much in tune with the current modern lifestyle, a quick way to spruce up one's home or lend a new aesthetic to its interior environment.

PRICE ₹990 to ₹22,000

INDIA MODERN

The collaboration finds its inspiration in India Amer Collection (top left); Cochin Collection (top right); another exquisite dining collection (below)

SPACES WITH SOUL

Designing some of the best muted, warm, and sun-kissed rooms with equal parts of colour and creativity, interior designer Ravi Vazirani shares his journey

By **RIDHI KALE**

Photograph by NEVILLE SUKHIA

CREATING MAGIC
Ravi Vazirani, known for designing beautiful homes across the globe, strikes a pose
www.ravivazirani.com

Photographs by PANKAJ ANAND

I didn't choose interiors, it chose me," he said in one of his interviews. You might know interior designer Ravi Vazirani as the creative genius behind celebrity homes such as Rhea Kapoor and Karan Johar, but what most don't know is that he never studied design, used to be the Associate Style Editor with Living Etc., UK, has an amazing furniture line and his dog Yoda is a bigger celebrity than him. We reckon his home is one of the most featured spaces on the internet. Why? It has that certain *je ne sais quoi*, a little something called flair—which either you have it or don't; and Vazirani has plenty. He started Ravi Vazirani Design Studio in 2010, an award winning, Mumbai-based design practice. We got him to talk about design, drama and everything that falls in between.

You are a self-taught designer, what made you take up design as a career?

RV I am a student of commerce with a master's degree in marketing from Griffith University, Australia. I was always keen to pursue design, however, I didn't have the right guidance and hence took a detour before I found my way back.

How many projects do you like to work on at a time?
RV As a studio, we end up working on 12-15 projects at a time. Beyond 15 projects, we end up stretching ourselves thin.

If not a designer, you would have been...
RV A baker. A floral designer. Perhaps even a leadership coach.

Projects you are currently working on?
RV An apartment in London, apartments in Hyderabad and Mumbai, a tapas bar in Mumbai, a villa in Coimbatore and a soon to be launched collaboration with Ikai Asai. We are also working on

our next furniture collection.

Is there a project close to your heart?
RV All our projects are special. We take on very little work and the focus is enjoying the work we take on.

A celebrity's home you simply loved designing and why?
RV Undoubtedly the home for Rhea Kapoor and Karan Boolani. Rhea was simply a pleasure to work with. She understands design and listens, which is such an important element in a client-designer relationship; and she has impeccable taste.

During the pandemic what have been the absurdist design requests you have received?
RV People not realising project timelines and the challenges around deliverables. Insisting on completing projects with absurd timelines. Definitely, the most absurd.

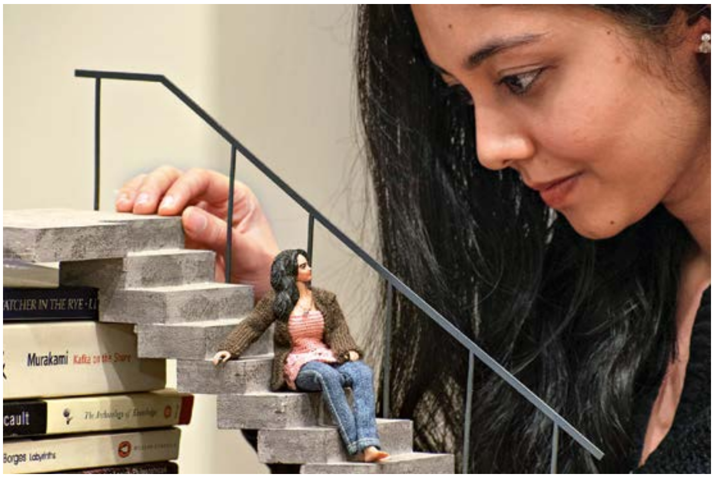
this & that

Miniature

IN NO SMALL MEASURE

We take a tour of The Dollhouse Project, a miniature home that follows the life of artist Ruchika Nambiar's mini alter ego, Little R

By **RIDHI KALE**



There was a time when smaller was smarter. Then the mini-sized bubble broke, and everyone wanted to live life king size with bigger TVs and larger mobile screens leading the pack. However, slowly, and steadily there has been a rise of all things small. Blame it on staying indoors for an unnaturally long period of time or people's love for DIYs, but there has been a resurgence of miniature dollhouses and sculptures on social media. Breaking the mini glass ceiling is 29-year-old, Bangalore-based artist, designer, and writer, Ruchika Nambiar with The Dollhouse Project (www.dollhouse.ruchikanambiar.com).

"I wanted to create a live storytelling experiment where a miniature version of myself could live her life parallel to mine," says Nambiar, adding, "That was how The Dollhouse Project first came to be. All through 2020, Little R, my 5-inch-tall alter ego, lived in a dingy drawer in my study. But after a year, she'd had enough of her squalid living conditions, that's when I decided to build her a dollhouse." Nambiar then approached Studio Slip (www.studioslip.com), a Bangalore-based interior design firm for the architecture and design.

The design studio created floor plans, electrical drawings, moodboards for every room and helped pick out furniture, drapes, linens, and accessories. "Based on their plans, I constructed the entire house in miniature in 2020, over a course of 8 months," she says. The house has a contemporary industrial aesthetic and features an eclectic mix of different textures, from exposed cement and Jaisalmer flooring and rammed concrete walls to exposed brick and moulded wall panelling. "Together we

Photographs by: ALOK UTSAV

FACT FILE

'The Dollhouse Project'
by Ruchika Nambiar

Architecture and Interior Design
Studio Slip

Miniature Construction and Execution
Ruchika Nambiar

LITTLE LEAGUE Ruchika Nambiar with her alter ego Little R (extreme left); various detailed living spaces in the house

picked out every piece of furniture from real brands like West Elm and Restoration Hardware, and then I replicated them in miniature." Five carpets are Jaipur Rugs while most of the bed linens, cushions and drapes were created with fabrics from VAYA Home and FabIndia. "The house was constructed out of laser-cut MDF and then primed and painted with emulsion paint, using specific colours we picked from Asian Paints' shade cards. The furniture too was made of laser-cut MDF and then cushioned with sponge and upholstered with fabric," shares Nambiar.

That's not where the magic ends. The staircase wall features press-dried leaves and flowers collected from Nambiar's and Studio Slip's gardens. "All the artwork is by 15 different artists from across the world such as Noel Fielding, Reneé French, Howie Wonder, Nirupa Rao, Devika Sundar and more, which I then printed and framed in miniature. Even the books in the bookshelf were suggested by Little R's followers," she adds.

In March 2021, Nambiar inaugurated the dollhouse with dollhouse-warming party hosted in her home. She sent out miniature invitations, served miniature food, and gave away miniature sweet boxes. "Ultimately, the goal is for her to become more and more real with each passing episode and have people follow her life like a real person."

A Tropical Paradise

GIVEN THE PROXIMITY TO THE SEA, A COASTAL CONNECTION WAS USED AS THE THEME IN THIS WEEKEND HOME IN CHENNAI THAT IS A MIX OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN DESIGN

By **HARSHITAA MOCHERLA**

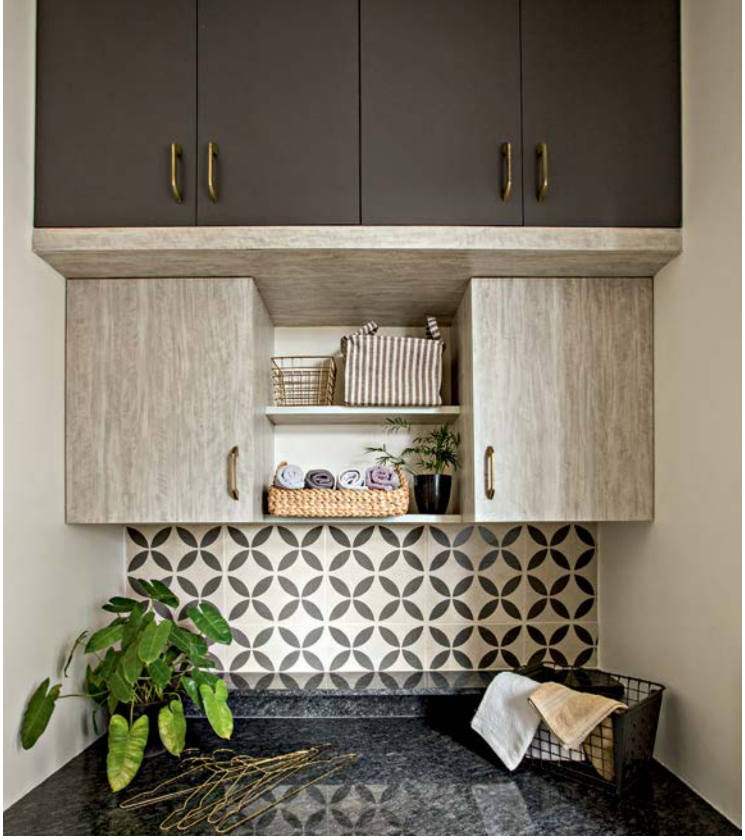
We call this home, House of the Tropics. Our clients live amidst the hustle and bustle of the city and were looking for a weekend home to unwind and relax. Given the proximity to the sea, they wanted a calm and serene atmosphere with elements that connect to the coast. The space was conceptualised to bring in various elements juxtaposed together bringing an interesting tropical feel through pops of colour, neutral tones along with coastal textures. By adding a movable metal screen to the open plan layout, we provided flexibility in the spatial arrangement with an option of viewing the living area, family and dining area as one entity reflecting a sense of infinity to the space.

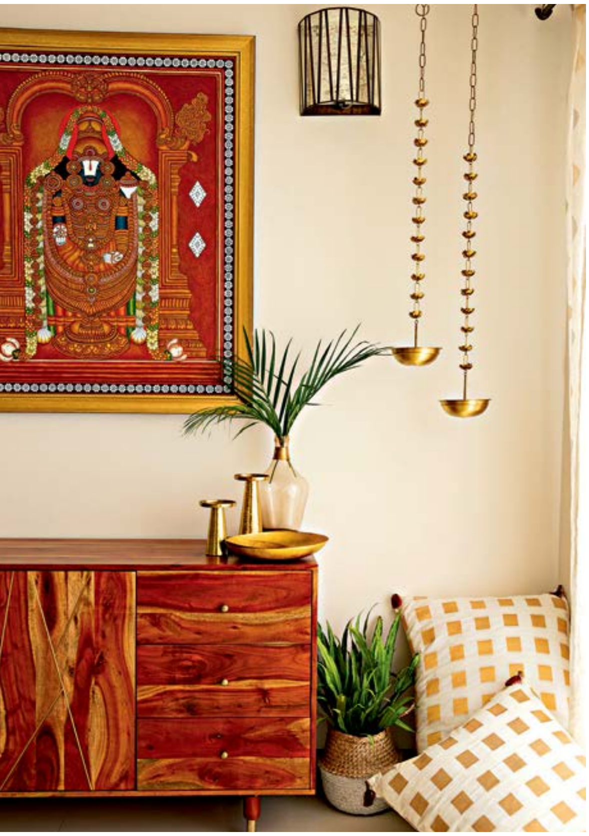
Using the coastal connection as the theme, elements like dark woods, floral upholstery, indoor plants, and calming colors such as green and blue were chosen to create a serene atmosphere. The

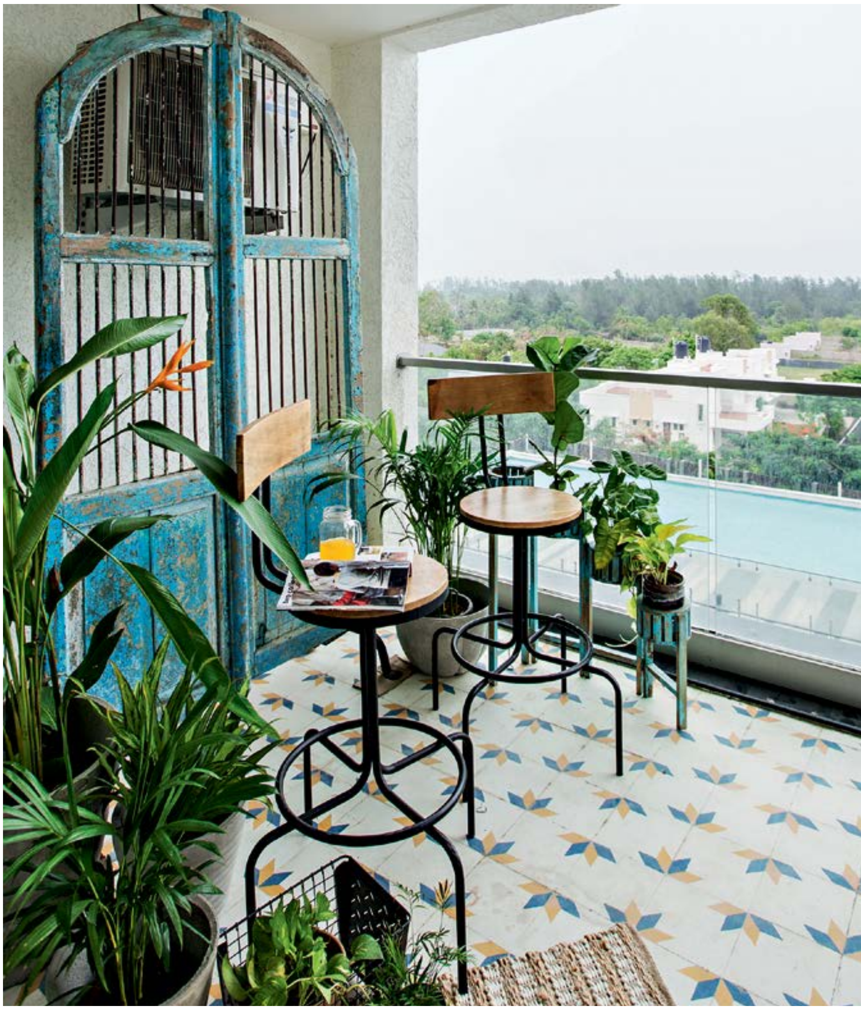
Photographs by: NEHA LULLA

LIVE IT UP
The living room opens into a patio

Harshitaa Mocherla is the principal designer and co-founder of Chennai-based Creative Concepts Designers, a multi-disciplinary design collective. www.c-c-d.in







EASY ON THE EYES
Gold tones define this nook (above); the living room opens into this blue and green patio (right); The service area with patterned dado tiles (top right)

CLEVER DESIGN (clockwise from right) Walk-in wardrobe in the master bedroom; the dining room with a rustic trolley from Auroville; a cosy nook in the living room

dining area features a rustic cart sourced from Auroville doubling up as a bar trolley that can be moved around. The kitchen takes on a patterned dado and floor with light coloured cabinets that are thoughtfully designed as per the client's requirements.

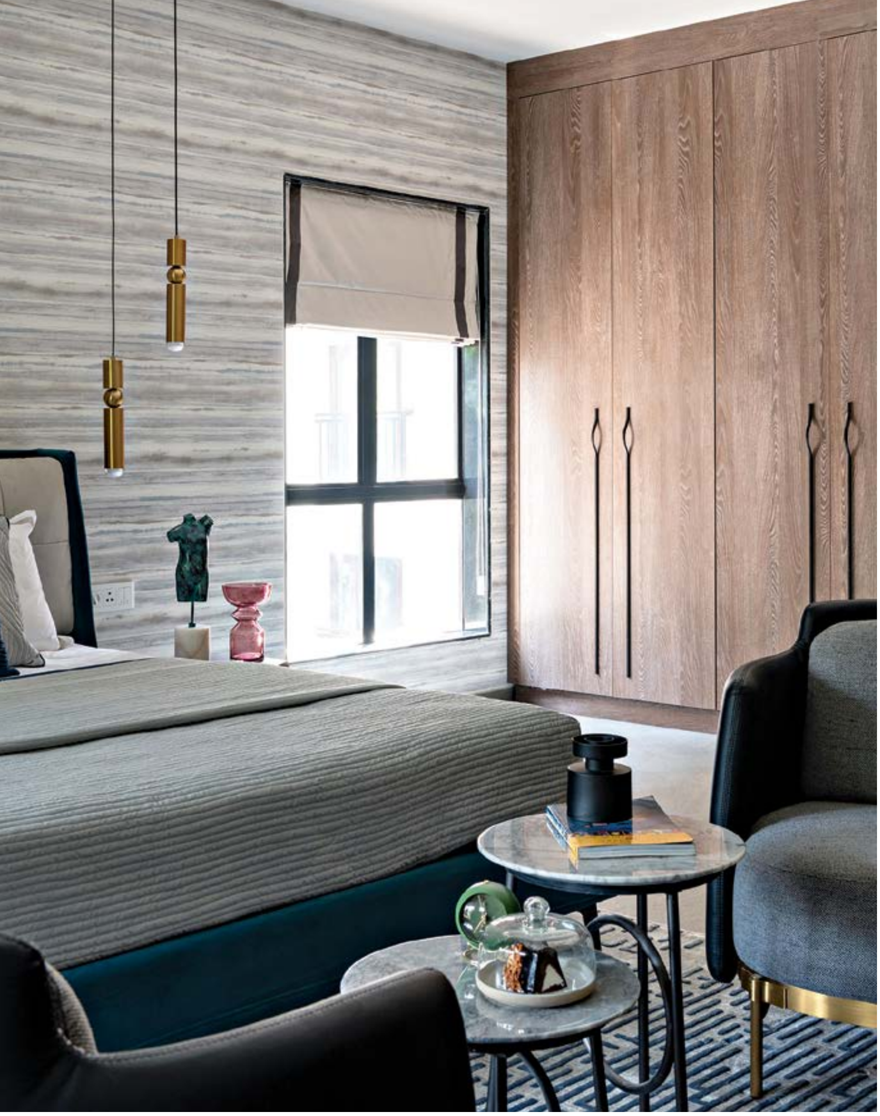
The sons' bedrooms carry a subtle theme of wood and exposed concrete, adding a distinct raw character to each of the rooms. The main bedroom exhibits a bright and airy aesthetic with a blue chevron patterned headboard and a pop of colour in the walk-in closet matching to the personality of our clients. Playing with a variety of patterns, textures and colours a tropical vibe cohesively brought in comfort and warmth throughout the apartment.

THE RENOVATION PROJECT

Designed during the pandemic on a tight timeline, this apartment in Kolkata was transformed from a dark and dingy space to a fun and functional one

By SARAH SHAM

OPEN UP
Art adds that punch of colour in the living and dining rooms



AND SO TO BED
Subtle hues juxtaposed with gold accents define this bedroom

Sarah Sham is the principal designer of Mumbai-based interior design firm Essajees Atelier. She founded Essajees Atelier in 2014 as an extension of her family's 106-year-old art dealership. www.essajeesatelier.com

The brief was to introduce a lot of natural light as the original space was dark and dingy. The home was for the client, a chef, her husband-to-be, and their three dogs. The only instruction was that it was time sensitive and had to be completed within six months. Sneha Singhi and her husband are easy-going and love to host their friends and family, and the apartment had to reflect that.

Let There be Light

When we were brought in, the clients were not living here. In fact, no one had lived here in a long time. Plus, the space was not laid out in a way that was functional and was very dark. It was a very long and rectangular. To walk from one end to the other would take you three to four minutes. So, we opened all the spaces and redid the layout and planning, and now sun bathes every nook and corner.

Chef's Special

Since Sneha is a professional chef, we wanted to integrate the kitchen into the main design. In its previous avatar it was a small space, tucked away. Now it has become the heart of the home. The 900 sq ft kitchen has sliding doors that open into the living and dining room. Which in turn open into the rest of the home.

Time to Entertain

They are a young couple and love to have friends and family over at least three to four days of the week. So, we opened-up the living and dining not only to the kitchen, but through carefully placing sliding doors you can move into the home theatre and the den as well.

Break and Remake

In this 6,200 sq ft, second-floor apartment, we had to break down walls, redo the flooring, reposition the bathroom and change the plumbing lines, to name few things. Basically, we redid everything possible. The biggest challenge was to complete it timely as the pandemic was on and for one month in between everything was put on pause.

Art of the Matter

At the beginning of the project, we were

Photographs by SURYAN DANG

FRESH OUTLOOK
(clockwise from above) The revamped open kitchen with sliding doors; the client's art collection on displayed in the corridor; plants add freshness to this corner of the living room

told by the client that they have enough art, however, it was only towards the end that we saw the pieces. The extent and quantity of artworks the client's husband owned were a happy surprise—they had everything from SH Raza and Vasudeo S Gaitonde to Paresh Maity with them. Two walls have now transformed into gallery walls. The art adds that amazing pop of colour and really makes the interiors come to life.

Private Paradise

The master suite, which is about 700 to 800 sq ft, is rectangular in shape. It has a large walk-in wardrobe and two ensuite bathrooms, one for him and one for her. This was part of the brief and worked out very well.

Making it Paw-ssible

Their dogs were an integral part of the design brief. The interiors have been designed keeping them in mind. Dogs slip on marble flooring and wood becomes very difficult to maintain. So, we kept rough and matt finish, grey tiles in a diagonal pattern for majority of the spaces with wood used only in the master bedroom and home office. Tiles are easy to maintain, they don't stain and can be easily cleaned. Further the upholstery has darker tones because dogs come with paw and scuff marks.

The clients are open-minded and gave us a free reign. We have used greens, blues, blacks, and whites teamed with lots of plants. The result, as you can see, has been fantastic.

Pair This

From the colours to the designs and the material this new collaboration changes the way you view carpets

By **RIDHI KALE**

The perfect pairing is stuff of myths and legends. In the design industry, it's akin to striking gold, which is what makes the collaboration between Jaipur Rugs and celebrated designer Vinita Chaitanya so special. A match made in design heaven the collection of coordinated silk carpet pairings is titled Inde Rose (French for India Rose). The range comprises five carpet pairings, one graphic-heavy piece complemented by a visually lighter one. Every carpet is made in silk, with 121 knots per square inch, and uses a sculpting technique locally known as gultaraash (like the pruning done by a gardener). This also marks Chaitanya's first every carpet collection. We for one can't keep our eyes off it.
PRICE on request
AT www.jaipurrugs.com

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